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“HE WITHDREW HIS GAZE ONLY WHEN THE OBJECT OF HIS INTEREST
HAD PASSED OUT OF SIGHT.”

A LOST INTEREST

BY

MRS. GEORGE WEMYSS

TORONTO

McCLELLAND AND GOODCHILD

LIMITED



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A LOST INTEREST

CHAPTER I

ON a hot summer's afternoon, in an office in Whitehall, one of the "powers that be" leant over a map, following with the point of a dry pen a circuitous route. It ran through the heart of Africa. The journey ended, Sir Everard Lang drew himself up and sighed. He had found the very job for the one man in particular; or, to be more accurate if less truthful, the very man for the job.

Several names had been submitted to him, and pressure brought to bear with two of them. He had selected a third as being that of the best soldier, the keenest and the most deserving of the chance. That the chance was unsought made the giving of it the greater honour; so Sir Everard argued in his own mind—seeking an excuse. Further, it was clearly his duty to select the man he thought the best. To have allowed any personal feeling to have influenced him against such a decision would have been wrong.

At the same time he thought himself fortunate in that those persons who had brought pressure to bear had not had behind them the weight of a grouse moor, or a deer forest, or any of those things which weighed most heavily in his scale of judgment as the month of August drew near.

Not that he would have recognised the existence of temptation to an integrity so officially invulnerable as his ; but he hated disagreeableness of any kind, and knew how difficult it was to be strictly moral without encountering it.

In private life he courted temptation ; was disappointed to find how rare a thing it was ; and when found, how powerless to lure. He would have succumbed more readily if he could have been sure of afterwards experiencing the pleasurable sense of remorse that had clung to him when he was a younger man. He had in those days tried gently to disengage himself from the tenacity of her embrace. Now that he sought her she evaded him. There were too few sensations in life as it was. He would not willingly lose one. He envied young men their struggles, their weaknesses, and, above all, their repentances. For this and one other reason, Egerton was chosen, and he started at twelve hours' notice.

The success of the expedition was assured. So Sir Everard had been pleased to say to the young man. The success so far as Sir Everard was concerned was speculative. This he had not said to the young man.

Speculation was what most amused Sir Everard. It added zest to life. A certainty bored him to extinction. Success he liked if by the time he reached it he still wanted it. A prize had often been within his reach when he had not cared to stretch out his hand to grasp it.

The route of the journey decided, the map of Africa was replaced.

The journey was a long one and would take time.

Time was what Sir Everard wanted. It was all he asked of the moment.

He next turned his attention to a house-agent's

list that lay on the table. It was alphabetically arranged. He found "S" and quickly Sussex.

He put a cross against, "A very desirable residence." That it was fit for a nobleman, he ignored. Also the number of bedrooms.

They happened to be numerous. He need not use them.

The house was situated exactly where he wished it to be. Ten miles from somewhere else. To be within an easy motor drive of that somewhere else was what he wanted. He usually got what he wanted, and not entirely on account of his hair, which waved naturally. Very young men thought he presumed on that.

As regarded distance, ten miles was just right. It was nothing in a motor. But it happened to be beyond the radius of one woman's curiosity. There were other women whose range of curious vision was longer. No distance in their cases would be sufficiently long to disarm their suspicions. He made up his mind to ignore them. He could afford to.

He decided to take the house, without consulting two or three pretty young married women who had offered him as much as he wished of their newly bought experience.

He wrote and asked the agents at what date he might take possession of the noble mansion, with its pleasure grounds, its Dutch and Italian gardens, its pergolas and its hundred and one advertised attractions?

He had no illusions as to the veracity of the description.

He knew exactly what the Dutch garden might be—twenty or thirty slabs of London pavement, inappropriately placed. A few meagre cypresses and

bad statues might easily pass as an Italian garden. Everyone knows that an arch, in the fertile brain of a house-agent, quickly develops into a pergola. Given a good nib it is as easy for an agent to write the one word as the other.

The longer word grows under the point of the pen.

On the same hot afternoon, under the shade of a tree, sat a girl. She was little more than a child, but being married she was, properly speaking, a woman.

There was, however, nothing womanly in the virginal lines of her figure, in the soft shy look in her eyes, whose depths were troubled for the moment by a recent sorrow. The tears that were hardly dry on her cheeks were a girl's tears.

She cried more than anything else at the wickedness of a world that could allow such things to happen.

She had been brought up to think the world a delightful place.

She had been guarded against its sorrows, shielded from its temptations and blinded to its wickedness.

If, as a child, she had strayed from the garden there was old Nathaniel Hedgerow, woodman, who would bring her back. He was always ready to lay down his axe and see her home, telling her, as they walked, of birds and beasts and the names of the flowers she stooped to pick.

When she grew older she found the flowers were called by other names, which was only natural since Hedgerow had much knowledge but no learning.

She had grown to think there would always be someone ready to bring her back in case she wandered. There might be, but it was possible he would not be a Hedgerow, wherein lay the difference, also the danger.

It was even hotter under the tree than in the London office; but it was pleasanter. The buzz of the bees,



"SHE HELD OUT HER ARMS AS IF IMPLORING MERCY."

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the scent of the flowers the girl loved. When she was in London the hum of the motor-buses reminded her of bees, and the sight of flowers in a window-box carried her thoughts straight away to her flowers and her garden. Which shewed she had some imagination; whether enough to constitute a capacity for feeling to their uttermost, both joy and sorrow, remained to be seen. It was a problem that interested Sir Everard, as did the fact that she was eighteen.

She too pored over a map of Africa. With the point of a knitting-needle, she too followed a route, not a cautious one.

The route cuts were amazingly short. She made them with determination. The route on that map was closed to anyone else. No one could ever do it again at the point of a knitting-needle, without popping through the heart of Africa. Nothing in the nature of forests and waterless districts daunted her. She had always disliked geography; now she defied it.

The journey her knitting-needle made was a short and decisive one.

Looking from the map to the blue sky, a band seemed to tighten round her throat, choking her. She held out her arms, as if imploring mercy of some power unseen. The God she had always prayed to had failed her.

As she had prayed for dolls as a child—not so long ago—she had prayed recently as a woman that she and her husband might never be separated. Every day she had thanked God for giving her such happiness. So it was not because she had been ungrateful that it had been ruthlessly torn from her. She had been brought up to say “thank you.” Her nurse had told her if children didn’t say “thank you,” things

would be taken away and given to those who did. She was beginning to think that Nannie and Hedgerow had lived in a world of their own making. Which was quite true.

Tears blinded her eyes. The map of Africa rolled off her lap and a puppy at her feet proceeded to demolish it.

Then the girl remembered a promise she had made—a solemn promise, recently made. Out in the scented summer night she had made it. She had been glad of the darkness. Never again would she walk out in a garden on a summer night without thinking of that promise. She pulled herself together. As a soldier's wife she must wait. It was her duty. If he could go she could wait. If hers were the harder part, she was proud to bear it.

He was so lucky to get the chance. She wondered who had given it to him. Not Sir Everard. Of that she was glad; she didn't like him.

Her thoughts flew from the misery of separation to the joy of her husband's return. The thought of it made her shy.

It was curious that in a few hours she should feel that if, at that moment, he were to stand before her she would be too shy to look at him. She caught up the puppy but he begged to be excused. He was busy. She put him down.

So two journeys were made that hot summer's afternoon. One at the point of a pen; the other at the point of a knitting-needle.

One was long; one was short. One was made by a man; the other by a woman. The journey still to be made, by the one man in the world in the eyes of the woman, was to be made at the point of the sword.

The puppy having found the map of Africa very little to his taste turned his attention to a house-agent's list. He sampled it and found it much easier work. A certain amount of resistance was right enough and good for the teeth, but—

The sound of thin paper tearing aroused his mistress from the thoughts of that return. They were so realistic that she blushed. She smiled at her own foolishness, and the next moment was grieving to find she could smile.

She rescued the list from between the paws of the puppy. "Oh, darling," she said, "how am I to read it?"

The puppy didn't say. He snapped at a fly and pretended he had caught it. He hadn't, of course. It was only puppy swagger.

He found he could show off now. The long-legged creature he adored who was always chasing him and pretending to be a mosquito—ridiculous idea—had gone somewhere. Where he didn't know! Hiding behind a bush most likely! He wished he would come back in spite of the teasing, because the girl wasn't much fun without him.

The puppy sat up and put his head on one side and gave one bark, then another. The long-legged creature was being unnecessarily funny. So the puppy barked again. Then the girl said, "It's no use, Puppy; he's gone."

The puppy, not trusting women, went off to search the flower beds, on the plea that if you want a thing properly done, do it yourself. He had learned that early in life; had opened his own eyes to the fact. He looked behind the tallest delphinium he could find, which shewed he at least grasped the height of love, if he was vague as to its breadth. Its depth, he

knew to be purely gastronomic. He felt it deep, deep down many times during the day.

It was recognized by those in authority twice a day. He was told by pessimistic, older dogs that it would come to once a day.

Meanwhile, the girl pieced the list together. It was her intention to take a cottage, miles away from everywhere, within sound of the sea. She loved the wash of the waves on the beach. She had let their own house. It was too big to stay in alone. She couldn't go home and stay with her people; because for one thing they were too sympathetic, for another, too unreserved. They would ask her how much she cared, how much she loved Dick! She couldn't bear it.

The band tightened round her throat again. The world was a cruel place.

Sir Everard found it a delightful world. He thought he was very fortunate in securing a desirable residence within an easy motor drive of Mrs. Egerton's home.

House-agents lacked the sense of perspective. They exaggerated the size of a back-drawing-room and forgot to say how near the house was to some other. In this case "within ten miles of Fairhome" was how it should have been listed.

CHAPTER II

THE day after Sir Everard took possession of his country seat, he motored over to see Mrs. Egerton. He persuaded himself that he was anxious to hear how her husband was getting on. He could not have got far ; but it was only right to show interest.

The motor glided up to the door. In his eagerness Sir Everard sprang out and asked if Mrs. Egerton was at home.

The maid-servant said she was.

He didn't know the servant was deaf, although he was quick to see she was plain.

He was shewn into the drawing-room. It was the very room he had expected—large, full—not too full—of beautiful things, of lovely flowers. Just the setting he would have expected. He sighed. His sigh was answered by one rather deeper. It came from a funny old thing, so he called her, sitting at a table, doing a jig-saw puzzle.

"A chaperon," he thought to himself with impatience. "How unnecessary!" If Mrs. Egerton were that sort of woman he should lose interest in her at once. The chaperon did not look up.

It was quite impossible that anyone could mistake Everard Lang for either a piano-tuner or a clock-winder, so he could afford to remain unnoticed, particularly by a woman like this one.

"It's Napoleon and his generals," grunted the chaperon; "this is a hat belonging to someone, ain't

it?" she said, holding out a piece of wood for his closer inspection.

How he loathed jig-saws unless under certain circumstances.

They had their uses in filling a breach left by palmistry.

"I daresay it is," he said blandly.

"You can sit there if you like," she said, "so long as you don't put your sleeve on to my bits. I can't bear that."

Sir Everard wondered how long he could bear any of it. He looked longingly out of the window. He saw undulating lawns and glimpses of colour. Mrs. Egerton, he thought, must look lovely among flowers. To his mind every woman had her own background against which she looked her best. There were women who looked theirs in a garish, brilliantly lighted restaurant. Those he would sedulously avoid seeing by daylight. No beauty to him was complete unless the setting was right. A Madonna in a music hall didn't appeal to him. The incongruous never did. In that he differed from some men. He differed in many ways from most men.

There was the maternal woman; let her have children by all means. They suited her. They spoilt another; they materialised her.

Mrs. Egerton would look her best against a background of flowers as delicate, as lovely as herself. Against a wood in early spring—the tender greens—the soft purple bloom of birches—they would be her complement. Her face was exquisitely tender and sensitive. Her figure, in a child-like way, perfect. Her movements the poetry of grace and motion, which was rarely found in anyone so young. Grace often came with the powder-puff.

Sir Everard, worshipping at the shrine of youth, wished she would come!

He won the respect and admiration of the chaperon by fitting a very kinky piece into its proper place. It was as well to make friends with the chaperon. He initiated her into the secret of the grain of the wood.

She pounced on the principle like a cat on a mouse. He rose in her estimation.

The afternoon wore on; he was bored to tears.

His spirits rose at the sound of a voice carolling in the distance. It sounded young [and joyous if a little flat.

"I allow them to sing," said the chaperon, "it's the kitchen-maid. She gives vent, as she calls it, so I'm told, from three to five. Why shouldn't they sing?" this fiercely.

"Why, indeed?" said Everard Lang. He thought, "What the dickens had it to do with this old thing? Did Mrs. Egerton allow the kitchen-maid to sing? That was the point."

Tea was brought in. It was not in the least like the teas Mrs. Egerton had had in London. He hated biscuits for tea, loathed them. At five o'clock in the morning, so long as they were digestive—suggestive a child called them—they had their uses. He preferred to eat them out of a tortoiseshell box.

"Is Mrs. Egerton coming?" he said at last. This roused the old lady. She left the legs of Napoleon, looked at her visitor—"the intruder calling for a subscription to the local cricket club," she dubbed him in her own pre-occupied mind—and said,

"Mrs. Egerton? Why she's gone! I've taken the house. Goodness me, you've come to see her! I'm Lady Blatherwake."

"Of course—it's the first time you've looked up. It's ages since I've seen you. I'm Everard Lang."

"Ages! Centuries! I never see anyone. You were a boy when I last saw you. You've got on. How! Push or ability! Your mother had the one, your father the other. I'd have known you anywhere. I've heard of your smile. You haven't found it of much use this afternoon! Waste of ammunition, eh! smiling into an old lady's toupee? It isn't a toupee as it happens. I get even with my beautiful contemporaries there. Every hair of it my own and no one would know. There's art for you! It takes a Frenchwoman at forty-five pounds a year, my wardrobe and an absolute lack of morals to do that.

My niece! Some idiot has sent her husband to Africa on a wild-goose chase. What did they do it for, and the children just married! Cold-blooded, inhuman things, officials. Surely there are enough unhappily married men to choose from."

She upset Napoleon and his generals in her anger, and poured out the nastiest cup of tea for Everard Lang that he had ever tasted. He balanced a biscuit on the edge of his saucer and swore under his breath.

Lady Blatherwake said she never drank tea. He could have guessed that. Why did plain women invariably explain the obvious?

"If you care to stay and dine, my chef's another thing altogether. What I like, I have good."

She returned to Napoleon. Sir Everard hesitated. He couldn't spend from now to dinner time putting Napoleon and his generals together. On the other hand he couldn't go until he had learned Mrs. Egerton's address. From the look on the old lady's face he knew that it would be only by deep strategy or sub-

lime innocence that he would get at that, which amused him.

If he could get at it without staying to dinner, he would. If not he would dine. In any case he should motor back to dress.

A drive through delightful country alone was preferable to doing a jig-saw puzzle with a woman who was no longer young.

"It's a great chance for Egerton," he said, looking at the woman who had certainly been young once, but never beautiful. "This, I think, belongs to the stair-case?" holding out a small piece of crimson.

"Chance? Bah," said the old lady, seizing the piece of wood, waving it backwards and forwards and finally putting it into a reserve heap at the left-hand corner of the table, "a boy doesn't want a chance through the gates of hell at his time of life. He's done nothing to deserve it."

"The theory that Africa is the white man's grave is rather exploded now," said Sir Everard gently, in the kind of voice that Valde Raleigh said made her goose-skinny. Lady Blatherwake was past the age to feel that, but she was not unconscious of its charm.

"Don't tell me that," she said; "I'm not a board school boy, neither am I the mother of one. I know most things. Among others that soldiers shouldn't marry. It's a trite enough saying. But heaps of people do what they oughtn't to do. A dull place the world would be if they didn't."

She looked intently at Sir Everard, defying him to contradict her. He was entirely of the same opinion. "Funny place the world," she went on. "If a friend takes my good umbrella and leaves his bad one I am supposed to say nothing. If he leaves his good one

and takes my bad one I am supposed to say something. Well, I do just the opposite—in theory.”

Sir Everard smiled ; she was explaining the obvious again.

He noted, with malicious glee, that a large proportion of the crimson staircase was hanging on to the lace in her sleeve. He hoped it would remain there, for the present, and, in time, be carried to the farthest part of the house and swept away by the third housemaid.

“In theory,” he said.

“‘In theory’ I said. Well, you’ve seen my niece, therefore you can understand the young man was sorely tempted. As to the girl, why she married him I can’t imagine ! She might have married anyone.”

That was Sir Everard’s point ; the very thing he felt most strongly about. The fact that she might have married anyone showed that in marrying Egerton she had lacked the social sense, a grievous thing in woman—a thing to be deeply deplored !

“And where did you say your niece is ?”

Lady Blatherwake laughed. She raised her eyeglasses, elaborately mounted in chased gold, and looked at him. It was no light thing that scrutiny. She bit her underlip with her very excellent teeth and laughed again.

So he found it expedient to motor back to dress and back again to dinner. On his return, the door was opened by a footman. At exactly the right distance behind the footman stood a butler—a smart butler, not an old lady’s butler.

Sir Everard’s spirits rose. The way in which the butler divested him of his coat satisfied that peculiar sense he possessed of the fitness of things. He had hopes of the chef. Earlier in the day, in reviewing

the chances of that chef's excellence, he had determined that no true artist would submit to having his best dishes handed round by a parlourmaid like the one who had that afternoon opened the door. In fact, he doubted that anyone, with a soul at all, could look at that face without losing something. To get accustomed to ugliness blunted the fineness of one's artistic perceptions. It was a danger to which Sir Everard would never lay himself open.

That Sir Everard appealed to something in Parkin was evident, since Parkin confided, later in the evening, to Mrs. Bland the housekeeper, that Sir Everard was "no fluke." The reverence with which Mrs. Bland accepted the statement shewed that it was praise, and praise of a high order.

Lady Blatherwake and her guest sat down to dinner in silence. Before Sir Everard had finished his fish he was wondering what crime the chef could have committed which necessitated his hiding in an out of the way country place and ministering to the appetite of an old lady who, on her own confession, saw no one. It must have been a crime of a particularly heinous kind. Much should be forgiven him. Suddenly Lady Blatherwake shot this remark over her shoulder:

"Good game, Parkin?"

"Disappointing as to my own form, my Lady, but hopeful as to Thomas's progress."

At this tribute the footman got crimson. Parkin then proceeded, at a gesture from Lady Blatherwake, to give a detailed description of the game, which, of course, was golf.

Having, with due regard to his language and deference to his listeners, landed himself, through no fault of his own, in a bunker, and having taken three

to get out and was still in, Lady Blatherwake said he might leave himself there for the present and go on with the next course.

This went on at intervals all through dinner, to Sir Everard's astonishment. A woman who could talk to her men-servants during dinner of golf and yet keep them up to the mark in their work, was to be respected.

He was longing for the moment when he and his hostess should be left alone. He wanted to know what it all meant.

The moment came. It was unwelcome, in the sense that the dinner was over. Like all perfect dinners it had been short.

"We will smoke here," said Lady Blatherwake.

Cigarettes were handed to her.

Sir Everard watched with amusement her jewelled fingers thinning the cotton wool and putting it into the cigarette holder; fitting in the cigarette and lighting it, with deliberation, at the small silver lamp handed to her by Parkin.

Cigars were handed to Sir Everard by Parkin, with just that feeling of reverence which was due to their excellence.

He knew, from personal experience, that he was offering Sir Everard a good thing; Sir Everard guessed he was taking one and was grateful.

A good dinner, good wine, a good cigar, these were things that made life amusing.

"I daresay," said his hostess, "that you are surprised at my allowing my men-servants to play golf?" She knocked the ash off the end of her cigarette as she asked the question.

"Not in the least; nothing astonishes me."

"Tha.'s untrue to start with. You were astonished.

I saw it. It was cleverness on my part to see it ; not carelessness on yours to show it. You disguised it admirably. I should imagine you excelled in hiding what you feel and in showing what you don't feel. I let my men play golf because I disapprove of men-servants in theory, yet find them a necessity in practice. They lead an unmanly existence which encourages the worst in them. Exercise is the only thing. I insist on their playing golf every afternoon from three to six."

"What does the golf club say to it ?"

"It has nothing to say in the matter. The men have their own course at home. We had Braid down on the opening day. It was the proudest day of Thomas's life when he touched Braid's brassey. It gave him a taste for the game. Here there is a small course laid out by Dick Egerton. Parkin is afraid it will spoil his game. However, he's got to play. It's exercise. It keeps him out of mischief for one thing and in health for another.

"It's the only way ! Blatherwake used to say the same thing. But he hadn't the courage of his convictions. I have. I don't mind what I say or what I do. It's one of the advantages of being a plain old woman. People can take me or leave me. Leave me, I prefer. My friends who don't leave me, I find, are largely affairs of the stomach, not of the heart. A good chef—well, you know—I shall probably see you again. Tell me about yourself."

Sir Everard could be a charming companion and an extremely interesting one. There was nothing more delightful than when he talked of himself. It was a subject which amused him immensely, and never bored other people. From habit he talked to Lady Blatherwake as though she were young and

beautiful. It amused her; it also determined her not to give him Violet Egerton's address.

He vowed vengeance on the old lady as he motored home, at the same time reserving for her a certain amount of blessing. She deserved some for her gastronomic sense in possessing such a chef.

When he got home he looked up Lady Blatherwake in the "Book." Lady Blatherwake looked him up. In both cases their curiosity was gratified at the expense of their judgment.

Sir Everard returned to town the following day. An empty house in the country was of no use to him. He must either fill it or ruin the servants by letting them do nothing. He might give up the house, of course. The next week-end he filled it.

It was a beautiful old place. The agents had not exaggerated its beauties. As a background it suited some of his guests better than others. Those it suited least well were the most unconscious of the fact. They talked loudly by moonlight. Everard Lang shuddered.

CHAPTER III

SIR EVERARD found himself at a loose end. He had five weeks' holiday before him and on his hands a large country house, for which he had no use. It only remained for him to spend the time in some one else's and to leave empty the one he had taken. It might be politic, although tiresome, to lend it to some one from whom he might, in the near future, look for some return. There was nothing he particularly wanted; nothing that he couldn't get, as a matter of fact, without its entailing any sacrifice on his part. Not that lending a house need entail any. It was simple enough. But it was not within his power to prevent the valet of his tenant from falling in love with the second housemaid, left with the house. It wouldn't in most cases have concerned him; but in this one she happened to be his servant and the daughter of a friend's gamekeeper.

It was as much as Sir Everard's place was worth that anything should happen to the girl—his place among the guns, of course. In such a way does man create responsibilities.

He could hope for no more, the hands of Lady Blatherwake.

Among the houses he knew, whose doors were always open to him, he chose, without hesitation, the Raleighs' in which to spend a large proportion of the time that promised to hang heavily on his hands, unless certain things happened. He meant them to happen. He wrote to Mrs. Raleigh.

"My interest is aroused in little Mrs. Egerton; do ask her to meet me on the tenth! You told me to name my own time! You will like her. She won't exhaust your sympathies. She won't demand much, but what you can give her she will acknowledge beautifully, with just a look in her eyes which is charming, and to a younger man than myself might prove bewildering. She satisfies my eye without endangering my heart. It is pleasant to arrive at that age without being fat; isn't it! Do ask her to Lochewen. You would be for her a liberal education. She exactly needs what you alone can give her. I am not going to flatter you, in fact it would be beyond my power to do so. What do you say to dinner at the Ritz on Monday and a play afterwards! Shall we go our own two selves or does your conscience require, at the moment, a *partie carrée* to ease it! I never quite know with you!

"It would be kind to recommend your lesser dressmaker to Mrs. Egerton. She has the dress sense but is given over much to beads. You will know at once what I mean! Mrs. Egerton is very recently Mrs. Egerton. She bears the honour gracefully and remains a child. The cruel authorities—says Georgina Blatherwake—have behaved with monstrous cruelty in separating the young things. But their excuse, no doubt, is that the husband is a good soldier, with something, I suspect, of the administrator latent! It is his chance.

"She was a Charlton—a thing not to be despised. People have, for several hundred years, been quite pleased to be one, from father to son, mind you! Mrs. Charlton has lived up to the tradition; rather too much so. If there had been fewer sons there might have been more of everything else.

"Mrs. Charlton was a beauty and never knew it. I should like to save the daughter from that. It is so unfeminine! Mrs. Charlton is unworldly enough to rejoice in Dick Egerton's size, strength and looks, generally. It was more by good luck than by good management that she got a son-in-law with any worldly goods at all. He has some; but not enough! How bored you must be! I'm not asking you to meet Mrs. Charlton."

Valde Raleigh got the letter just as she was starting for Scotland. She uttered an exclamation of impatience as she read it. Bored? Of course she was bored! She didn't in the least care who Mrs. Egerton had been. She hadn't room for her and wasn't prepared to make it.

"Frances," she said to a girl who sat at a writing-table at the other side of the deep bay-window, "here's this tiresome Everard coming with a new enthusiasm! What has become of the woman whose husband reads every evening and never speaks! What a perfect husband! Women never know when they are lucky! Do you know a Mrs. Egerton by chance?"

Frances laid down her pen and said she knew, by chance, several. By accident one, and from choice two.

"What are they like? Don't try to be funny."

"All? Well, one is rather fat."

"Then that's hopeless—the one—quick, Frances, I'm so peevish. You are softening the blow."

"I am trying to. It will be a very heavy one, Valde. Will it?" The girl looked at her and smiled.

"No, not now. I'm a little tired of him. Besides it's rather a compliment than otherwise to write as he does."

"I am sure he could write in no other way—to you."

"It's clever of him really, to know that I couldn't be jealous of any woman."

"It's hardly clever, but it shows he is less stupid than some men."

"Go on, Frances."

"The Mrs. Egerton I mean is quite lovely. But what adds piquancy to the situation is that the baby is desperately in love with her husband."

"And where is he?"

"He is on his way to Africa."

"At his own manoeuvring?"

"No, I should say at some one else's."

There was a silence. Valde Raleigh sat and looked out of the window. She smiled.

Frances Bailey looked out of the window too. She did not smile.

"Tell me what she is like?" said Valde, a little impatiently.

Frances rose from her chair and walked to the window which looked on to gardens, the most charming in London. There were very few secretaries who had the chance of looking out on to such gardens. She was a lucky young woman. She was acutely conscious of it. So was Valde Raleigh. With all her beauty there was something about Frances Bailey she envied. A clean length of limb and a look of perfect health.

Valde Raleigh imagined she had that perception, rare in women, of seeing another woman from a man's point of view. She possessed it sufficiently to see that Frances would be judged not strictly beautiful by most women. But her head was set on her neck, her neck on her shoulders, in a way

many a greater beauty might envy. Her hair grew luxuriantly. It was a rich dark brown—in some lights, red. It was plainly dressed and was beautiful enough to stand the test. It too looked healthy. Health was the dominant note about Frances Bailey. If she lost that, with it might go her beauty. She attained the distinction in the eyes of some of Valde's friends of being healthy without being dull. It was something attained. Her dress was simple and perfectly made. At her neck she wore a turn-down collar of old embroidery; at her wrists cuffs of the same. That she was intensely feminine Valde recognised.

"Men were idiots," she thought. "There was a girl in a thousand, unmarried."

What did she suggest men should do that they had not already done? They were limited by the conventions of the society to which Frances belonged.

"She is like moonlight," said Frances; "a rose by moonlight."

"My dear girl, what is the matter with you? But go on—a rose by moonlight has no scent and therefore lacks its complete beauty."

"Only the dark roses lose their scent," said Frances. "She is like a white rose by moonlight."

"I hate insipid women!"

"But she isn't; she is the most vivid creature I have ever seen."

"Clever?"

Frances laughed.

"Is she a flirt?"

"I have told you she is absolutely devoted to her husband."

"That would not prevent her being a flirt. If a woman is really sympathetic, no devotion to one man

can prevent her taking an interest in others. Shew me the man who can satisfy a woman. An understanding man."

"I shouldn't dream of doing such a thing; the danger would be too great." Frances laughed, then added, "She would be quite safe to ask to Lochewen."

"Safe for whom?"

"Well, for herself and for Sir Everard. She has such a delightful mother."

"And—he? What guardian angel watches over him?"

"The fear of being advertised with a woman not really smart. He is very careful."

"Frances, I didn't know you were so 'catty.' It would be amusing, then, for the onlookers?"

"It might be."

"It's tiresome of him; though one knows it's only a passing craze. He will lose interest in her the first time she wears the wrong sort of frock, or boots when she ought to wear shoes, or shoes when she ought to wear boots; or when she shakes hands when she ought not to—nothing distresses him more than the too ready hand. Or the first time she says the wrong sort of thing in the wrong sort of way, or even the right kind of thing in the wrong sort of way."

Frances laughed. "He makes life difficult, doesn't he? How refreshing it will be when he arrives at the stage when he thinks anyone may do anything."

"He has arrived so far as to allow that some may."

"I fancy the danger of Violet Egerton wearing the wrong sort of clothes will grow less as she goes along. Her social sense will be cumulative. But he will lose interest in her, no doubt. She won't stand the shock when he tells her to call him by his Christian

name! Yes, he will lose interest. I am counting on that."

"You musn't be too sure; he is faithful."

"We all know that."

"You all know wrong then, if you think what I imagine."

"What do you imagine we think?"

"You are tiresome; answer these letters for me—not Everard's—these. Say I'm going north to-night. Then like an angel write to this most boring Mrs. Egerton and ask her to come to Lochewen on the twentieth of August. The tenth is impossible. Everard must put up with the second week. He refused when Hugh asked him."

Frances Bailey took the bundle of letters and sat down at the writing-table. She put the letters, one by one, in a pile in front of her. She took up the top one. "What do you call Mildred?" she asked.

"What does she call me? You might have grasped, by this time, that most elementary of rules."

"Of course—we humble mortals are inclined to follow that rule. 'Dearest' she calls you."

"I follow the rule with the Mildreds of my acquaintance. She knows exactly what each one signs herself. If an unfortunate woman expresses herself one 'very' less than the time before, Mildred writes to know why? I have neither the time nor the inclination to write and explain why she isn't my dearest. On one occasion she wrote to Mary Munroe, explaining that it was she who had divorced her husband, and not the other way round. Mary, as it happened, knew nothing about the divorce, so it hadn't in any way affected her signature. Quaint, wasn't it?"

"And in writing to a man?"

"Mildred ? She never wrote to any man in her life, I'm sure, except an upholsterer."

"Will the fact of your going to Scotland answer all these letters ?" asked Frances, handing one to Valde.

Valde took it, looked at it and laughed.

"I'm glad it's you, my dear, the most discreet of persons. That's what I mean when I say 'have a friend—a real friend—for a secretary.'"

"A real friend you have," said the girl gently.

"It's very loyal of you, when you really disapprove of me ; don't you ?" Valde looked up from her letter, "Look at me, Frances." Frances shook her head.

"I shall never give him away," said Valde, "even when it comes to his marrying a dear, fresh little girl of eighteen. Why do men want to marry girls of eighteen ?"

"I'm not sure for the girl's sake that you—— However, one of the nicest men I know says he shuts up a novel when the inevitable married woman appears. I can't picture you the inevitable——"

"Well, I feel one ! Hugh is so fearfully serious. He doesn't want me to go to Lochewen for some inscrutable reason. I have only to want a thing. . . . Your sensitive friend is a bachelor, I suppose ?"

"Purely from choice."

"And perhaps from habit ?"

Frances nodded. While she neatly expressed the regrets of Mrs. Raleigh, Valde wrote to Everard Lang. The Ritz was out of the question, because she really was going north. In any case it would have had to be a *partie carrée*. Since she had taken to parting her hair she looked so good ; it made people suspicious.

When Sir Everard read that, he was glad he was

the friend of the woman who wrote it. Another woman had lately written in answer to a similiar invitation, explaining that she never went out without her husband, except to luncheon—of course tea—political and geographical meetings. She hoped Sir Everard would understand. Whether or not he understood he was bored to tears.

"Shall I come with you?" asked Frances, when she saw Valde had finished her letter.

"No, certainly not. You'll miss your dinner—no, Frances, no."

The girl insisted, the woman resisted. "My dear child, you needn't so slavishly sacrifice yourself to Hugh's interests."

Frances coloured and Valde went on, "Dear Frances, I am dining with Cara, just with Cara—faithfully. It's quite true, so you needn't worry. You can tell Hugh that you trust me—absolutely!"

"Don't! I wish you wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what? Make fun of Hugh? Good, serious, upright and honourable Hugh."

"You know I should like to drive with you."

"Of course I know, but just now I don't want you to drive with me. Cara says she can't face anyone, at present, quite so wholesomely happy as you are. The look of latent wickedness in my eyes will counteract the saintlike look which my hair gives me. By the way, she hasn't seen that yet."

They went into the hall together; Valde kissed the girl and passed out to the waiting motor. She turned as she stepped into the car.

"Say good-bye to Barbara—my best love, and tell her to be good."

The motor slipped away; the hall-door was closed and Frances went back to her writing-table.

"Hateful—hateful—hateful," she said under her breath.

She took up her pen to finish the letters she had been writing. A few minutes later she heard the hall-door open and close. She bent her head low over the table and the colour rushed to her cheeks. The door of the room opened and a man came in.

"Oh, it's you, Frances?" he said, throwing himself into an armchair.

"It is I," said Frances, "to be strictly grammatical."

"Where is Valde?"

"Just gone; she's dining with Mrs. Gore on her way to the station. Rideout and Grouse will go with the luggage. Grouse has engaged sleeping berths and done all that is necessary—most excellent person. Valde sent you her love and said you were to be good—no, that was Barbara. It included you, of course."

"Are you tired?" he asked after a moment.

"Tired? Why should I be? I sometimes wonder if I have ever been tired in my life!"

"You never look it."

"But for all that I like to get my evenings to myself—as they say in shop circles. It is the attraction daily work offers, isn't it? If you talk I shall not get my evening. I must finish these letters."

"Valde's?"

"Of course."

"What a foolish waste of time women's correspondence is—let me see."

He reached out and took a handful of letters.

Frances's hand closed over his.

"I may look; why not?"

His eye caught the signature of one; he looked disgusted and threw them all back on to the table.

Frances saw the look and understood it. She had to make up her mind then and there. "Just as I had made them so tidy," she murmured. "It so happens that some of them are mine. This one in particular."

She separated one from the others.

"Why do you do it, Frances?" he said; "he's not worth it. He's a blackguard—why won't women take a man's word for it! You won't believe it, I suppose! You're too straight to go in for this sort of thing. It's playing with fire; don't do it."

He got up and paced up and down the room. "Forgive me—Valde's awfully fond of you—we all are. I want you to promise me something."

"I will—it's so nice of you to care—see!" she tore the note into small pieces and threw them into the paper-basket.

"I'm sorry if you care."

"Don't, please. How is a girl to know! You won't say anything—to anyone?"

He held out his hand and in it she placed another letter.

"That one may amuse you," she said.

He was amused; but not by the letter. She would let a man write to her as Blacker had written, while she wouldn't let another man touch her hand. Funny things—women!

Frances Bailey said good-night, knowing that she had disappointed the man she was anxious to please. She wondered how much he had seen. It was hateful, but better she than Valde. She had less to lose. The absurd thing was that with Valde it was more stupidity than anything. But that Hugh would never recognize.

"I must run up and see Barbara. Good-night!"

"How are you going?"

"My 'bus at the corner."

"Not at this hour! Let me order the motor."

"Absurd and ridiculous man! What is the matter with the hour! At eight o'clock on a summer's evening, 'buses are at their best, and most amusing. I shall see the gay and frivolous crowd driving out to dinner; a ceaseless string of people setting forth on the quest for quail. 'Oh, zose quails!' as the Frenchman said."

She sprang up the stairs. Hugh Raleigh watched her.

Then he went back to the library and sank into an armchair, the prey to his thoughts. Which—being those of a man with a beautiful wife admired by others and indifferent to himself, who had, in addition to other things, a very charming secretary, obviously on the high road to moral destruction—were of necessity melancholy ones.

CHAPTER IV

FRANCES BAILEY was not on the high road to moral destruction. She was on the road to Chelsea, which may or may not be the same thing.

Socially, it may be destruction in the eyes of those persons whose area of acquaintance is bordered by geographical limitations. To people of another kind there is a certain romance clinging to Chelsea. It has an artistic and literary centre to which Frances might easily be supposed to belong. Whether she did or not was open to argument. The length of her neck and the lowness of her collar proclaimed her an aspirant to that distinction. In neither particular did she probably meet the requirements of artistic Kensington.

But anyone in the 'bus might have been justified in judging her artistic. If they had followed the argument of dress to its fundamental basis—which in a 'bus is difficult—they might have thought her boots non-literary. Her boots she owed to her up-bringing, her father, his fathers before him, her boot-maker and his fathers before him.

Nature had given her hands an artist might rave over and a throat that might well prove an inspiration to him. In the head, which grew like a flower on the neck that a poet might liken to the stalk, she had implanted a deal of good common sense.

In addition to common sense she had endowed her with a just judgment and a loyal heart, a combination

which makes—taking it all together—a valuable woman.

Hugh Raleigh thought a great deal of Frances Bailey and more perhaps than he ought to have done about her. Frances's common sense came to her rescue here. She thought a great deal of Hugh Raleigh and very little about him. That's where her loyalty came in.

When the 'bus got to where Frances wished to get out the conductor was, where he always is when wanted, on the top.

Before Frances could do anything, a young man nearest the bell got up, stretched out and rang it.

"You stop here, I know!" he said, raising his hat and smiling.

Frances flushed a little but she smiled at him. She was amused, at the same time a little annoyed. She was very reticent and disliked the idea that anyone should know her goings out and her comings in. She took the number as she got out and avoided that particular 'bus for a few days, which was a little hard. In avoiding the 'bus she extinguished the light in the life of an exemplary young man—for the time being.

She didn't know what an inspiration she was to him; how the sight of her helped him day by day in his work, how he admired her, revered her for the goodness he read in her face; how he liked her best in brown, and a hundred other things.

Other pretty women travel in 'buses, but not often one so calculated to satisfy the artistic senses of a lover of beauty as Frances Bailey did. There was a fineness about her beauty that ordinary prettiness does not attain to.

Had Frances been married, she would no doubt

have told her husband about the young man, and if recently married the husband, militant, would probably have expressed a desire to horse-whip the young man, which shows how necessary it is that husbands should learn to horse-whip with discrimination. If, in this case, he had carried out such a threat, he would have done a grievous thing in breaking the heart of an elderly widow, who lived over a china-shop, a long way down the King's Road. She looked forward, every evening, to hearing how the beautiful lady was, who travelled—on purpose—with her son. In her eyes the 'bus contained but two persons. Her world was hardly more populated. She and he, the mother and son, never got tired of speculating as to who the lady was and why she journeyed every day from Hyde Park Corner to the street out of the King's Road—wet or fine. No, not always on wet days. On some wet days he missed her. On one he had just caught sight of her as she went past in a closed car. The traffic was kind to him; his 'bus and her motor stopped side by side for the fraction of a second. He saw her beauty against the dark lining of the car. It seemed to him to glow with a new radiance; to stand out luminously against the background. He had never seen her against anything but the window of a 'bus.

He decided that, dressed as she was, she couldn't be a daily-breader. Once he had a chance of discovering her name. She was reading a letter; the envelope lay on her lap, address up. He looked away. He didn't want to know; to learn how far apart they were. In escaping the envelope his eyes fell on the word "darling" with which the letter began. The world became a desolate and howling wilderness. She was engaged to be married.

As Frances put her latch-key into the door and opened it a voice said, "You are late, darling, and John has gone to a man's dinner!"

"I'm so sorry, Jan. Valde went north and I waited to finish letters for her. I went up to say good-night to Barbara and that always hinders."

"Why has Valde gone north?"

"Why, Jan; why?"

"John thinks there must be some attraction."

"John is supernaturally wise."

"Is he right?"

"Can John be wrong?"

"With the greatest ease!"

"How much braver wives are than sisters!"

"Was he never wrong when you lived with him?"

"Never! But I am so sorry to be late. You haven't kept anything hot for me?"

"Everything keeps hot of itself this weather. There's chicken in aspic and a salad and——"

"Thank you, darling; I'll run up and change. I shan't be a moment."

While Frances went upstairs to change, Jan Bailey sat and thought. She was full of noble resolutions. Among others that she should still love John when he was fat. Even when he became fat she should love him! She had been out to a luncheon party and had come home surprised to find that she was really quite satisfied with John. Did it show a lack of refinement on her part? She had found herself singular in having no fault to find with her husband.

"He satisfies you?" a woman had asked her, in a voice that had throbbed with suppressed emotion.

"Quite, thank you!" Jan had said.

"Can you conceive no circumstances under which

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you would find it difficult to care for him!" went on the throbbing voice.

It was then that Jan had thought of John's father.

She told the impulsive woman that John's father would present a difficulty. But the triumph of spirit over matter—love overcoming flesh—she could rise to it. Whether the woman found the twinkle in Jan's eyes disturbing is not known. She sighed and said, "A child—a child playing at life! May you never wake up!"

As Jan waited for Frances, she wondered if the intense woman had cast a spell over her, she was so sleepy. Frances found her with her elbows on the table, her chin in her hands, her eyes shut.

"Sleepy, Jan?"

"The aspic is so wobbly. It yawns when you touch it!"

"Better than being stiff and reserved," said Frances. "Ann is making great strides."

"You think so? I'm so glad. I told her she was rather extravagant with the cream to-day and she said if we could do without cream, she could. Was it rude? Ann thinks I'm so young!"

"For one of your age that is extraordinary. People speak to children impatiently from habit. It's a bad habit."

Jan took the turquoise chain that hung round her neck and tried to hang it on her nose. Finding it just not possible she dropped it.

"Are they frightfully fond of each other?"

"Hugh and Valde?"

"No, Mr. and Mrs. Jones."

Frances laughed. "There's no putting you off."

"No, John says just the same. Are Hugh and Valde fond of each other?"

"You said frightfully devoted."

"Isn't it the same thing?"

"Not in the least."

"Are they?"

"Well—Valde is fond of Hugh, and he is absolutely devoted to her. Does that satisfy you?"

"No, I think it is very sad. Does she like other men?"

"My dear Jan, you horrify me! Married women should be careful how they talk to girls."

"I know! Miss Hare told me Cara had told her things she need never have known. Having arrived safely at the age of fifty why should she ever have known? You're horribly loyal, Frances, and so dull. It's no use asking you things. I heard to-day that they did not get on one bit."

"Then you can contradict it on the best authority—mine."

"I'm so glad," said Lady Jane Bailey, casting her eyes heavenwards in an abandonment of thanksgiving. She didn't believe Frances all the same. It was strange that she and John, and of course her father and mother, should be the only happily married people.

"I wonder why people marry," she said.

"For a variety of reasons probably," said Frances.

"I suppose it's only right to have a reason, even if it's a funny one. Mrs. Bates married Bates because before she was married she saw him, in a dream, standing at the foot of her bed. She hadn't been properly introduced to him even, so she took it as an omen."

"Did you tell her that dreams weren't compromising?"

"Yes, I told her she needn't have married him; that people did have fast dreams and never told."

"You didn't say that, Jan?"

"I did. I said the nicest people might have them—"

"What was the luncheon like?" said Frances;
"you're very yawny."

"Looking at the aspic makes me yawn; there's nothing so catching. How d'you know I went out to luncheon?"

"Because you've been talking about Hugh and Valde. That shews you have been to a 'hen luncheon.'"

"Mrs. More was there."

"Was she? Did she enjoy it?"

"No, she looked like a hen that had got into the wrong chicken-yard. It must be a handicap, looking as good as she looks, musn't it?"

"She must miss a lot, certainly."

"Well, she didn't. Nobody minded, they were quite scandalous."

Frances had finished her dinner and they went upstairs. "Jan, I want to speak to you."

"Speak away; is it about sweeping under the rugs? I told Emma and she said she always had done until the last few days since her aunt has been ill. When John comes in he walks to the piano and runs his finger along the outside, then walks over and puts his finger into a flower pot. When it comes back wet and muddy—that's joy in life for me! But he's a darling."

"It's nothing to do with house-maiding or watering plants; it's to do with my being here." Jan knelt on the floor at Frances's feet.

"Valde says I suit her exactly; she wants me to stay on indefinitely, as her secretary."

"What sort of letters do you write?"

"Don't talk! I don't care to lead a life doing

nothing, as you know. I should like to go on with Valde, but I can't always live with you and Jack; it isn't fair."

"It's quite fair. We have the same disregard of other people as father and mother have. It runs in the family. But why should you do anything? Why not dance and sing and music and play and go to race meetings as other girls do?"

"I don't care for them, that's why. I like doing something. The question is—shall I come back for the autumn? It won't be till late autumn, as I have promised to go to Lochewen."

"We should love it to be back for always; but—well—I have something to talk to you about—but I didn't mean to do it yet. Shall I wait?"

"No!"

"Well stay, Frances, until we have no room for you. I wish we had room for both—it's absurd that such a tiny thing should take up so much room—the room, that reminds me, is to be pink and white. Everything white, with pink roses everywhere—shall you love it?"

"The room or the person that takes it up?"

"Principally the person!"

"Darling," said Frances, "what an absurd baby it will be. How shall we ever distinguish it from its mother?"

"I wonder if its mother will ever see it!"

"Jan, what nonsense!"

"It's not nonsense, and it's not morbidness; it's just the old absurd happiness that overcomes me. It's a happiness I shall never be able to bear—that's all!"

"Women have borne it!"

"Yes, but happiness doesn't affect every one as it does me. I bear it badly, Jack says."

Frances put out her hand and Jan took it in hers and held it against her cheek. When Frances withdrew it the tears that had fallen on it were nearly dry. "Is this what you call happiness?"

"The very deepest kind!"

The next morning when Frances came down to breakfast she found Jan and John busy with the egg-boiler. She smiled and said she wouldn't have an egg.

"Two, then, John," said Jan.

John put in two eggs. Jan poured in the water. John undertook the dangerous part and lit the lamp. It was the knight of old coming out in the modern man. Alas! that an egg-boiler should be the only means of escape.

Letters were read, plans were made, and John's dinner of the night before discussed. "Had everyone been delighted to see John at the dinner?" He said they hadn't expressed any particular delight.

Jan thought them horrid and unfeeling. By that time the eggs were done! Jan jumped up, "Oh, John, your egg is cracked!"

That was the sort of thing Frances loved. When she had lived with John it had never been his egg that was cracked.

Wives were wonderful things, she thought. Every man should have at least one, as a matter of education. Jan Bailey—correctly, Lady Jane Bailey—was the Missendens' only daughter. She shared with an only brother what was left over from her parents' devotion to one another. As babies they had been looked upon as intruders. Jan being a late spring baby, had prevented her mother going north for the spring fishing. Tommy—courteously speaking, Claridge—was an early spring baby of another year, so he was taken

north and was left to kick and crow on the banks of the river while his father and mother fished. The nurse felt the indignity acutely, but had to admit that his lordship prospered amazingly and grew prodigiously. The young parents at intervals came to look at him and discovered that he was really a beautiful baby and bore a striking resemblance to both of them. This interest aroused, caused them to look more attentively when they got south at the little girl they had left behind. She was three years old and was really delightful; pretty as well. Jane laughed heartily at the discovery, although she herself had known it long ago. Her laugh was infectious, and her father caught it badly.

"She's a ripper," he said, drawing her on to his knee, and she laughingly acquiesced. In fact she did nothing but laugh.

"Funny man," she said, screwing up her little nose, a habit which clung to her.

"Who's this?" said her father, pointing to his waistcoat button.

"Tarp," she said sagely.

"Who's Tarp?" he asked. No one knew. Nurse, if she knew, didn't say.

"I don't know that we ought to have called her Jane; it was rather hard luck," he said, turning to his wife. "Who the dickens is Tarp?"

"You suggested Jane, darling," said his anxious wife.

"Yes, but I didn't know she was going to be like this," and he twisted a tendril of golden hair round his finger and felt its softness with his lips. "By Jove, it's like silk!"

The mother felt it too. "Will it get dark?" she said.

"You ought to know."

"How should I know?"

He shrugged his shoulders; he supposed all women knew.

"I'm a wife first and a mother afterwards," she pleaded in extenuation.

"I hope so!" he said; "you must be careful what you say before your daughter." The daughter laughed and told them all she had done during their absence—in fact almost since she was born. They looked from one to the other. Neither of them understood.

"What's your name? Can you say that plainly?" he asked.

"Jan," she said solemnly; and the name stuck to her.

Jan and her father played games—the father was to hide something and Jan was to find it. Jan jumped for joy. "Sall ve play emelies or felends?" she asked.

Her father smiled. "It's enemies or friends, my lord," said the nurse. "If it's friends you help her to find the things."

"Felends, Jan!" said her father. Again Jan jumped for joy.

When Jan hid something it seemed to be a case of bitterest enemy. She could crawl where her very big father had the greatest difficulty in getting. The greater the difficulty the more Jan laughed. On one occasion, when the difficulty seemed quite insurmountable, Jan came up to him and putting out her arms, whispered, "Felends." Her father said, "Yes, please, Jan."

Jan lead him, she walked on tiptoe with a finger to her lips, which meant "silence," and pointed to under the sofa. The only way to get under the sofa,

for a man of his size, was to reach over the back. Which he did while Jan held on to one leg.

Then exhausted, he said, "Let's rest!"

"Yets all of us west!" said Jan, laying her head down on the seat of a chair and laughing up at him.

After a while Jan said, looking very serious and very good, "We better go to bed, bettn't we?"

It was deemed wise, and Lord Missenden suggested putting his daughter to bed. Lady Missenden looked on a little wistfully. It was the first time she had ever felt out of it.

They went to the nursery and Jan was soon what Nannie called "Down to the vest."

The mother was the rightful person here. She caught hold of Jan. She had no idea what a delightful thing it was to hold—out of the vest slipped Jan. "Oh, Jane, I didn't mean that!"

"Mister Tarp tatch me!" called Jan, dancing distractingly.

Nannie came to the rescue and popped a nightgown over Jan's head. She held that Lady Jane was too old to be seen in her bath by gentlemen. It should have come gradually. If his lordship had done it from the first!

"Shall I come with you?" said Lady Missenden, as his lordship, crestfallen, made for the door.

"No, you stay!" he said magnanimously. Later, he asked what it was like. And she said exactly like trying to hold a trout.

"By Jove, not really."

"You are not jealous?" she asked.

In such a manner did Jan make the acquaintance of her father and mother. She very soon learned to be careful, when with them, not to monopolize her father. With an ingratiating way which stuck to

her in after life, she would draw her mother into all their games and conversations. When she and Tommy were much older they would steal away when their father came in from hunting until he and their mother had said all they wanted to say. They realized that their father and mother were everything to each other; that they themselves were charming and delightful extras.

So when John Bailey asked Jan to marry him she said, at once, that it was the least she could do for parents who had been so charming to her. "Darling mother," she said, "I am going to marry John so that you and Tarp can carry on your interrupted flirtation. I am marrying him for that reason and one other. Tommy you needn't mind; he never notices anything."

So, Jan with her laughter and her enormous capacity for happiness, married John Bailey and lived in the house in Chelsea, to which Frances wended her way that summer's evening.

CHAPTER V

A FEW days later Frances got a letter from Valde Raleigh.

"I miss you dreadfully, my dearest and most discreet of secretaries. You have shown an admirable discretion in forwarding my letters. You might have opened the one from Mrs. Egerton. Everard will lose interest in her in a week. She politely suggests that, as she has not the pleasure of my acquaintance, I must have made a mistake. She proceeds to enumerate all the other Mrs. Egertons. What a tiresome creature she must be! How can we manage it? I must, or Everard will think I am jealous. Do think, there's a darling! Didn't you say you knew her? Bring her—do! I found young Cameron home, wounded—invalided I mean. I was surprised. I am so glad to be able to cheer him up. He combines the innocence of a babe with the discreetness of an oyster. I am leading the simple life, gardening and ministering to Alec Cameron. The latter comes to me more naturally. Soothe Hugh for me! Why is he so difficult? Why is he the only man that doesn't love me? He ought to have married the placid widow of a dead policeman. I can't work myself up into a state of delirious gratitude over his goodness and faithfulness to me. Other men are faithful to me because they can't help themselves. He is fearfully exacting, you must own that!

"Our party for the twentieth is getting delightfully mixed. I cannot get a sufficiently good woman to balance Hugh. Mrs. Egerton is appropriated by Everard, which seems so quaint. Laura Listowen shocks him—Hugh—dreadfully because she wears a kilt. If she had had legs I could understand any man being shocked. Under the circumstances he might, at least, be grateful.

"I *am* vulgar, Frances darling. It seems to my common mind—or sense, if you like it better—that man's attitude with regard to women is so inconsistent. There are things he would abominate his wife or sister doing, yet would be sorry if someone else's wife or sister didn't do them. The things must be done, but not by his women-kind. To do Hugh justice, he is not like that. He would like all women to be angels. I wish I had been born good like you. Do I? Of course you can balance Hugh, but I imagine he bores you—does he?

"Then there's Angela, with very little of the angel about her, and a few others good without being particularly dull and a few others dull without being particularly good. Of men—there are Everard Lang, Alec Cameron, a rather nice Captain Burney, and the respective husbands of the above-mentioned women. A man for you? Don't look so superior! You can't have Alec just yet.

"Don't let Fräulein forget to take Barbara about her boots. I ordered three pairs for her. Fräulein has a deep-rooted faith in ready-made boots. See that she doesn't convert Barbara to the same. Tell Hugh I saw Sutherland yesterday and had a long talk with him. He said I looked 'just wonderful.' I certainly feel much better. I needed the change."

Frances smiled. Hugh, she was sure, would rather

have heard what Sutherland thought of the grouse prospects.

She didn't see how she was to get Violet Egerton to Lochewen. She didn't see why she should ; it wasn't playing the game.

She had not to do it after all. Everard Lang applauded the fate that took him and Mrs. Egerton to stay for a week-end in the same neighbourhood. She came over to dine where he was staying. These things happen to those who wait. It was with real pleasure he offered her his arm to take her in to dinner. It was with greater pleasure he heard her refuse it. "Is it worth while ?" she said. "It's such a short way, I can't lose myself."

He was delighted. He had thought her lovely. He had not dared to imagine her unconventional. It was not within his power to imagine she disliked him. She did, instinctively only. Associated as he was in her mind with Dick's expedition, he was, at the moment, the wickedness of the world personified. She did not know how attractive wickedness could be !

They were eating fish when their hostess suddenly leant forward and said to Sir Everard, "Will you say grace ?"

He, without a moment's hesitation, said grace. That he knew one, gave Violet a sense of safety—she had not up till then felt with him ; but she naturally wanted to know why he had been asked.

"Our absent-minded hostess has just remembered she was particularly told not to forget to ask the parson to say grace."

"But you ?"

"Do I look like one ? Our names happen to be the same. But what were we saying ! You were saying— Please go on."

She couldn't go on. She had forgotten what she was saying. The feeling of danger had returned; the saving grace had been but a thing of the moment. Sir Everard's charming voice perturbed her; it was so low, so exquisitely modulated, so musical.

He was so understanding. He said just what she wanted him to say about Dick without saying too much. There was a delicate intimacy in his voice which flattered her. She could readily have believed that he had never spoken to any other woman as he was talking to her. Some women would have suspected the opposite. It was all very bewildering. He made her seem clever.

Clever people had always made her feel stupid. She talked as she had never talked before. He drew her out. She interested him. He said he had never met anyone like her. Her goodness touched him. It stirred something in him he had thought dead. These moral resurrections were delightful and stimulating to Everard Lang. He went on to tell her that such a woman as she was could do so much for men. They rose to what women demanded of them. Had she found that?

She became more and more bewildered. Like a moth she flew round and round the candle and would have flown through the flame, had not Everard Lang, just in time, put out the light. He turned and talked to the woman on his other side who promptly said—she must have been aching to ask the question—“Why did Lady Catherine ask you to say grace?”

“I cannot imagine.”

“My husband looked so surprised.”

“He cannot have looked so surprised as I felt.”

“You didn't show it.”

"One cannot in this world show what one feels."

"Ought one to feel what one can't show?" she said, gaining courage.

"You ask that?" he said, smiling at her.

She grew crimson. He had emphasized the word "you" in such a way as to make her feel very uncomfortable. When she grew cool again she found he was talking of parish matters. Classes for young men—physical drill for boys and girls. "Girls? Yes, certainly. So excellent for the next generation—a well-developed woman meant healthy children."

All this in the same dangerously attractive voice.

His partner looked wildly backwards and forwards in search of the reassuring glances of her husband. Even a look, she felt, would be in a sense a chaperon. No clergyman's wife could, with impunity, listen to a man talking of the development of the next generation. Certainly not a good-looking man. This one, she realized, was more. He belonged to the set described as smart. Which she knew to be only another word for something much worse. The word, in its proper sense, might be applied to her Sunday hat, not to a man of this kind! One never knew how far such a man might go. It was not within the mental limits of a clergyman's wife to guess.

Two women were bewildered that night. The first because she was surprised to find how good she was. The second how wicked! To each the sensation was as pleasant as it was novel.

After dinner the women sat out in the garden.

When the men came out, Sir Everard did not at once join Mrs. Egerton. He stopped and sat down beside a plain little woman and talked to her of gardens. He could see, he said, by her face that she

loved them. Of course she did. She wondered how he could tell it by her face. She had never known before that her face told anything.

All her life she had suffered from an inability to express her emotions safely and discreetly as other women did.

Violet Egerton was disappointed. If she had not been, the disappointment would have been Sir Everard's. She vented her displeasure on the man who took a seat beside her. He was quite harmless, if a little elated, at getting next the beauty.

He quickly came to the conclusion that beauties were hard to interest. He had never before known coloured photography to fail. At last Violet saw Sir Everard leave the plain woman and come towards her. He laid a hand gently on the arm of the exponent of the art of coloured photography, and said, "My dear boy, I want to talk to Mrs. Egerton about her husband. I am afraid at the risk——"

It was all so quietly done. In a moment the photographer meekly went across to the plain woman, and she, with the newly discovered garden in her face, talked to him brightly and vivaciously.

Although she had nothing, personally, to gain by the discovery of colour in photography, she was immensely interested.

Violet Egerton had nothing to say when Sir Everard sat down beside her. He had many things to say, but did not say them.

Many of them she wouldn't have understood. She was new at the game. The jargon was a foreign

language. He confided in her. He thought he did. By such means must he sought to subjugate Eve. Adam can

have had so little to confide ! But Eve no doubt was as new to the game as Violet and as easily flattered. By easy stages he reached the question, whether women realized their power or not ?

Violet, groping in the dark, said she supposed some women did—clever women.

"Clever women ?" he said. "What do you mean by clever women ?"

In a flash Violet thought of the women held up to her in the days of her youth as models—women who had learnt Greek while waiting for the kettle to boil in the morning. They did not seem to be the women she wanted. Violet felt as if she were drowning. She would have liked to call out to someone to save her, but she didn't want to be saved. She didn't want to get out of her depth, that was all.

She wished he would talk of ordinary things—stars even !

"Aren't the stars lovely ?" she said, looking up.

"Which stars ?" he said, looking at her upturned face.

"All of them."

The line of her throat was so beautiful. "Look again," he said. Heavenly bodies he found a little cold and unsatisfying.

"Do look again," he pleaded.

She was so beautiful, looking up. He didn't say so ; but she felt uncomfortable, which was what he meant her to feel.

It amused him to tease her. She thought of Dick and wondered what he was doing. Was he stargazing, she wondered ?

"Do you care for reading ?" she asked tentatively, looking down.

"For what kind of reading ?"

"Well, interesting books."

"What books interest you?"

"Lots," she said.

"The love story which ends happily with a marriage and a honeymoon, or do you like it to end just short of the honeymoon?"

She felt suddenly ashamed of liking love stories.

"If they are good ones," she said.

"A bad love doesn't interest you—it very seldom has a honeymoon, has it? Or perhaps it is all honeymoon."

"I meant a good novel."

"Yes, a good novel interests me; but it's seldom so interesting as life. You know more of novels than of life, I expect. Yet you would enjoy life! Anyone with your capacity to feel both joy and sorrow—as you will feel them—must find life good."

"Not if one feels sorrow?"

"Yes, even if one feels sorrow!"

In spite of the warm night, Violet shivered. "Are you cold?" he said, knowing she was not. "Without feeling sorrow it is impossible to feel joy. The woman who feels most the loss of her child is the one——"

"Sir Everard, you are taking advantage of my kindness," said a voice. It was their hostess'.

"Mrs. Egerton, I want to introduce Colonel Foley to you. He knows Paraguay."

When Sir Everard said good-bye to Violet Egerton that night, he also said, "You will think seriously about Scotland?"

"But can I when I don't know Mrs. Raleigh?"

"It is the best way of getting out of an impossible situation. No one can afford not to know Mrs. Raleigh."

"Is she very beautiful?"

"Yes, she is wonderfully beautiful, but she is more than that. There are very few women like her."

"I don't quite know what Dick would say."

"Dick is a most sensible young man. He would like you to enjoy yourself, as far as is possible. He is happy in knowing that you can never be really happy without him. He can afford to be generous. Do come."

"I should love to."

Then Everard knew she would. What she loved doing he was sure she would do, sooner or later.

As the clergyman and his wife drove home in their pony carriage—phaeton he called it—she felt weighed down by a secret suspicion that she had been flirting. As a clergyman's wife she felt it to be her duty to confess. But she determined the confession should stop short at the fact of flirtation; it was not her bounden duty to confess she had enjoyed it. It was difficult at the moment to say anything, and yet if the moment passed, with it might go her courage. She was so low down; he so high up. Dick Egerton in Africa could not seem to his wife more remote.

Her husband sat on a footstool to drive, so as to have complete control of the pony. There was very little to control. But what there was he liked to be master of.

He carried the principle through life.

"Did you notice that handsome Sir Everard Lang," she said boldly. "I've often read his name in the papers."

"Can't hear a word, can't hear a word," came from high up, miles away it seemed. He was so inaccessible in his untampered integrity. He had had no chance of flirting; although it was to be questioned whether anyone who sat on a footstool to

drive a very small pony would flirt under any circumstances.

"It doesn't matter," she said; "I'll tell you later." This as loudly as she could without seeming violent.

"It's not very interesting, is it? I didn't call him handsome."

So he had heard. That meant that he was jealous. She hugged closer her secret. No one could rob her of the sense of worldly gratification she had enjoyed.

As the clergyman and his wife drove home, Everard Lang and his hostess stood by the open window talking.

"That lovely child," said Lady Catherine. "You mustn't turn her head."

"I turn her head! She is much more likely to turn mine!"

"What were you saying to her?"

"What did we say? I really don't know. She doesn't say much. At her age she needn't."

"Blanche says it's not what you say so much as the way you say it! Dear child, I told her Colonel Foley knows Paraguay."

"And doesn't he? By the look of him, I should say there was nothing geographical hidden from him."

"His eyes do you mean? Travellers so often have blue eyes."

"The accident of his birth may have something to do with the colour of his eyes; not his travels."

"But Paraguay isn't Africa?"

"Mrs. Egerton won't know that."

"Tony tells me I asked you to say grace! I didn't, did I?"

"Of course not, I said it quite of my own accord, as the child said."

Lady Caroline put out her hand to close the French window. In the moonlight her hand and arm were dazingly white. Everard Lang was glad that beauty remained to her. The sight of a woman who had once been beautiful and retained nothing of it, saddened him.

"When," she said, "did the child say it?"

"Every child has always said it."

"I thought you had a nice story to tell me."

"What's the good?"

"You mean I forget? But think how I enjoy them. It isn't everyone who can hear a story for the tenth time and not recognise it. I've put my social success down to that. Also my matrimonial happiness."

"Social success like charm is so difficult to analyze."

"Is success?"

"Don't you think so? One woman may have the best chef in London but no one wants to dine with her; another woman gives a dinner and no one thinks of the food."

"Possibly because it's so excellent."

"So we come to where we began. Talking of chefs—not charm—how does our friend manage to keep hers?"

"Lady Blatherwake? Why not charm, I love her. By the way, isn't that lovely child a relative of hers? What did you talk to her about?"

"You asked me that just now."

"Did I? I shall do it again. You won't turn her head?"

"There's nothing to turn."

"I'm not so sure. Blanche says . . ."

"Blanche is very busy."

"Why?"

"She's told you so much."

"Oh, she says Valde is looking very beautiful. How are things going there?"

"What does Blanche say?"

"Who told you?"

Everard laughed.

"She says she never said anything, not a word."

"I'm sure she didn't."

"Did I hear you asking that beautiful baby to go to Lachewen?"

"I suggested it."

"Are the Valdes of this world good for babes? She looks so good."

"Valde?"

"Well, no . . ."

"Have you seen her with her hair parted?"

"In the middle?"

"Precisely."

"What's her girl like? Quite too beautiful, I hear."

"Is that possible?"

"Did you know Mrs. Egerton before she married?"

"I met her."

"Who was she?"

"A Charlton."

"Where do they live?"

"Where they have always lived."

"How clever of them; so few people do that."

"I imagine they do it with some difficulty."

"Has the young man money?"

"A certain amount."

"Is there a child?"

"They've been married three months."

"Time flies, doesn't it? Jan Bailey is going to have a baby. The Missendens are delighted. He

wants to bath it. They say they wasted their own babies. They are absurd. She wears well."

"Lady Missenden? She would."

"Jan is very pretty, isn't she?"

"Quite—she won't possibly wear so well as her mother."

"Why?"

"Everything is a joy—nothing is so wearing."

"The boy?"

"Claridge? Quite an amusing boy!"

"What's the husband like?"

"Who's husband?"

"Mrs. Egerton's, of course; how vague you are. Perhaps he doesn't interest you?"

Sir Everard said on the contrary he interested him immensely.

"Well, what is he like?"

"Delightful."

"Don't go."

"I must write letters. Good-night."

"Poor hard worked man. Good-night."

He wrote to Valde Raleigh and asked her to write to Mrs. Egerton. "The surest way to her heart is through Africa. Say something about her husband. She is the dearest, the most forlorn little grass widow I have ever seen."

So Valde wrote and asked Violet to reconsider her decision. Which Violet did.

Valde telegraphed: "So glad Everard Lang coming up night of nineteenth, shall expect you same train."

Violet waited till the afternoon of the nineteenth and then wired: "Very sorry, cannot come till to-morrow."

So like the little pig in the story she outwitted the wolf; which shows the lessons we learn as children

we never forget. The wolf walked up and down the train scanning the names of those for whom sleeping berths were engaged and finally found "Mrs. Egerton," just as he was beginning to despair.

When she appeared just before the train started—heralded by a tall footman carrying a dog and a cushion, and all the other things which go towards the making of a fashionable woman's travelling equipment—she turned out to be a fat Mrs. Egerton. Possibly the one Frances Bailey knew.

Of course, the poor wolf was disappointed.

"Was he a real wolf?" a child would ask with wide eyes and a hushed voice.

No, he wasn't. He wasn't a wolf at all. If he had any intention towards the little pig it was to wire to Kingussie for a breakfast basket to be put into her compartment the next morning. That was all, and perhaps to be seen at a railway station in the company of a really pretty woman. Honourable intentions, both of them, and harmless.

CHAPTER VI

HIGH up in a turret, away from all earthly joys, sat a girl doing lessons. She was put with her back to the window—which showed a certain amount of ingenuity on the part of Fräulein since the turret was all windows—so that she should not see the moor she loved, the hills she loved, the clouds she loved. Even the joy of a possible rainbow was denied her. In London it was a balloon ; in both cases it was tyranny.

She was a beautiful child and to the infinite surprise of her lovely mother, she was fifteen years old.

Everyone else expressed a proper surprise that such a thing could be. Of course, Mrs. Raleigh had married at seventeen. A great many women do ; but they don't remember the fact until they arrive at the age of forty, and then express a very proper surprise if their friends don't remember it too. Men do.

Barbara was fifteen and beautiful, doing lessons she hated. She wasn't really a child ; but the word best conveys an idea of the limpid clearness of her eyes, the brilliance of her complexion and the extraordinary perversity of her behaviour.

"Mummy says," said Barbara slowly, "that Sir Everard's latest is coming ; what's a latest ? Not the gender, Fräulein dearest, that I can guess. It's the opposite always of the noun possessive, isn't it ?"

"Dear child, go on ; it is not for us to discuss Sir Everard."

"Mummy has latests too ; do you, Fräulein ?"

"My child, do you go on, what did I tell you ?"

"Do you wish you were beautiful—really beautiful, Fräulein?"

"Go on, my child, am I to say it one hundred times, the same thing?"

"No, two darling, I think. You're very dull you know Fräulein. It's hard that my young life . . ."

"Oh, you barbarous one," murmured Fräulein.

"Now, my child, will you go on?"

"You're not so bad after all. Quite hübsch really. You look ugly when you sit in the brougham, back to the horses and I see your profile in the glass—otherwise du bist sehr süß, Fräulein." Barbara was meanwhile showing Fräulein just what her profile looked like in the window of the brougham. The limits of the nose were hardly within an arm's length, but it showed well enough the kind of profile.

"Bar-barous one," murmured Fräulein.

"Fräulein, does your brother like being a missionary in Uganda?"

"His heart is deeply in his work, my child."

It was a temptation to Fräulein to talk of her brother. The bar-barous one knew that.

"Go on, my child."

"You would be beautiful in Uganda, Fräulein—supposing you went there. If I told Mummy what happened at the South Kensington Museum."

"Victoria and Albert, my child."

"Victoria and Albert then, you would have to go to Uganda."

Fräulein shrugged her shoulders.

"Poor little Fräulein, I wonder what the chief would say; I wonder what he would offer? I wonder how things are sold there? So much an ounce! What a price you would fetch! Genuinely good, solid, and . . . dear Fräulein, I am joking! You

shan't go there. Rather at Loohewen will we stay !
So ! I will say my lessons so nicely to please you ! ”

She stood up, clasped her hands behind her back and said,

“Ich habe. Du hast. Er hat. Wir haben.

“Was haben sie da ? ” says the chief.

“Ich habe meine liebe schwester,” says your brother.

“Wieviel kostet das pfund ? ”

“Das pfund kostet zwei cows.”

“Das finde Ich sehr theuer,” says the chief, and he wraps his beads round him and walks off.”

“Barbarous one, you are very naughty and unkind than you know.”

Barbara was all contrition at once.

“Not unkind, really ; you don't mean it.”

The child knelt before her governess and gazed up at her with eyes full of sorrow and contrition.

“Yes, really, my child ! You are shaping for a beautiful woman who thinks she can say and do what she likes because of that beauty.”

“But Fräulein, I was only rehearsing the scene between your brother and the chief. You aren't vexed Fräulein, dear ! Two cows a pound is good value.”

“Go away ; go, barbarous one ! ”

“Smile, Fräulein, smile ! ”

“I smile straightway enough, my child, as everyone will continue to do. It is that which makes me afraid.”

“I hear a motor—Sir Everard's latest ! Come. Look—lean out—far out. Can you see ? Far out ! ”

“My figure can no farther go,” expostulated Fräulein, “do you see anything ? ”

“I see a girl, that's all. She looks about as old

as I am. Fräulein, could I be someone's latest ? Joy—joy—"

She seized Fräulein round the waist and waltzed round the room. "Old Scotch houses are well and solidly built, have no fear, dance away, for the good of your soul—and your figure !"

"Now, my child," panted Fräulein, "it is time we went out. We will walk along the road and see what gay things are happening."

"The road, Fräulein ?"

"The road, my child. It is not good for the young that they see not life."

Fräulein had her wicked way, along the road they walked. Where the gaiety came in, it would be difficult to say.

A rebellious creature walked a few yards in front of her. She looked at the graceful young figure and sighed. The world was a strange place. One child born to walk like this, as if it all belonged to her, and another, just to creep along apologizing for existence.

Fräulein had put it to Barbara once ; had she thought how different a world it was to different people ? And Barbara had said, she imagined the people who crept along ashamed to exist were those whose belts and skirts didn't meet behind, or else whose plaquet holes were open. Personally, she never had a plaquet hole ; neither did her mother. The people who did, met trouble half way.

Fräulein sighed, it didn't quite explain life after all.

Barbara was not destined to walk for long on the high, hard road. She met her father. He said he was going up to Donald's ; would she go with him ?

She gave a war whoop and had her arm through his in a minute, hugging it tight.

He asked if Fräulein would forgive him, just in a way

that made it quite impossible for her to do anything else.

She smiled. Small use would it be to do anything but forgive. She had no choice, being as God had made her, forgiving and warmly susceptible. She watched them walk away, the girl cuddling close up to her father, her cheek against the sleeve of his coat.

Those two, at least, were happy, thought Fräulein.

She was right. If there was one thing on earth that gave Hugh Raleigh complete and perfect satisfaction, it was his daughter. He was essentially a father. The relationship of husband to Valde was too complex and difficult. He and Barbara were boy and girl together, with interests alike. Each sympathized with the other in the difficulty of getting home in time for dinner. Society was to Hugh a gigantic Fräulein.

The unfair thing was, that while he had only to bear the pained look of his valet when he was late, Barbara had to write out innumerable German verbs.

"It's Fräulein who makes my supper a sacred meal, Dad. Why should I eat if I don't want it? I suppose your dinner is a different thing."

Fräulein knew it might be hours before she saw her charge again. She would come back hungry and happy and incredibly wet. Why could these English not walk along the high roads made for the purpose by a wise Government if not by the Almighty Himself? To her well ordered Teutonic mind the terms were synonymous. They were strange people, these English! To think of them with the seriousness that was necessary in approaching a subject so difficult, she must sit down. So!

She clambered over a few rocks and sat down under

a rowan tree which commanded a good view of the road. There would she see all that passed of an exciting nature. She loved the rowan tree. By rights its berries should be made into jam. They were wasteful, these English. There was food good for all—left for the birds alone. Her boots they were English; but she could not say they were comfortable. Of course, they weren't English; but Fräulein thought they were. Then she fell to thinking of Barbara. Looking at her own legs made her think of Barbara. Not that their legs were alike, except in so far as legs were bound to bear a resemblance one to the other. Was it good for the child that when she wanted her stockings changed she should stick out a leg—so—and a maid should spring forward and put that leg straightway into a stocking? Fräulein had asked Mrs. Raleigh to say Barbara should put on her own stockings and Mrs. Raleigh had said, "Why? Why should Barbara learn to do a thing she would never have to do? It was waste of time."

And Fräulein had shrugged her shoulders and had said, "Perhaps." What was the good? Barbara would marry a rich man, that was certain—a lord—yes, most certainly a lord! She would have a wonderful wedding. She would be dressed in silver tissue as fine as a cobweb. She would wear pearls—ropes of pearls. Fräulein would herself wear brocade of a richness—she raised her eyes to the sky for inspiration—she found it, a richness immense; in colour sky blue. She was a little appalled at the thought of her own magnificence. She was a little uncertain as to whether blue was her colour. But what did it matter? She would cry all the time. Her face would, in any case, be spoilt beyond redemption. Mr Raleigh, he too would cry! She

could see him as he led the bride up the aisle. Mrs. Raleigh? No, she would never cry. She would smile—smile as she always did. Fräulein, for one, was tired of that smile; it was sometimes forced, never “contagious.” People would tell Mrs. Raleigh that she looked as young as the bride, which would of course not be true. But they would say so. They must if they would be asked to Lochewen. With women like Mrs. Raleigh, it was necessary. Then Barbara, in pale blue, would go away with the lord, and she would cling to Fräulein and Fräulein would give her the comfort that was within her power to give; but as she had not been married, it would not be within her experience. For that she was sorry. Tears blinded her eyes when she proceeded to picture Barbara with a baby as beautiful as its mother, but in conduct, much superior. Barbara was adorable, but she had not been brought up as Fräulein would bring up a child.

Then Fräulein proceeded from thoughts of Barbara with a baby, to Barbara’s household, to her kitchen, and how she would feed her husband, brought up as she had been. From Barbara’s kitchen she went on in her thoughts to cooking in general, and lost herself in the heights of hering salat and other delicacies as delectable and German. It did not show a want of culture on the part of Fräulein to think of hering salat. It is quite possible that the most charming of Englishwomen, sitting on the side of a German high road, away from all she cared for, might allow her thoughts to dwell for a moment on eggs and bacon. No one would blame her. From cooking, Fräulein went in easy thought-stages to poetry, and she sat at the side of the road, perched on a rock, under the shade of a rowan tree and recited.

The road was neither so gay as she thought, nor so lonely.

She found herself reciting to an audience of one. The audience unfortunately didn't know how well she was reciting. The audience was a very attractive one and very serious. It asked very politely if the poetry was Fräulein's own composition, at which she exclaimed, "Gott in himmel!" as well she might, seeing that it was Goëthe she was reciting.

The serious audience didn't realize it had made a very serious mistake combining with it a very great compliment. Much of the compliment was minimized when the audience proceeded to explain that it didn't understand Gaelic, although its sister did.

"She writes poetry," he said. "I'll bring them for you to see."

"Me?" said Fräulein.

The audience nodded and went on to say that his sister had got a guinea once. Then she married and left the poetry behind, in her desk in the school-room.

Fräulein asked what the poems were about, and the audience said they were about the usual things—seas and trees and things.

"I don't know that it is right that I should see them," said Fräulein.

The audience said as they were left about, surely it was all right; besides people liked their poems being read.

Fräulein supposed under the circumstances it would be quite right. Being fond of poetry, sentimental and susceptible, she was already looking forward to meeting again this charming audience, and she was already wishing that Barbara could see

it. Which was exactly what the audience was also wishing—in fact he was working to that end. He put it the other way round, that was all.

Fräulein at the risk of having to read indifferent verse was determined to meet the audience again. "Did he fish every evening?" He shook his head and explained that he had only just arrived and all the others were out—where, he didn't know—shooting; so it was dull up at the house.

Fräulein put her head on one side and looked at the audience. It was wrong that a thing so charming should be dull.

She sighed with contentment at the combination of pale blue shirt and purple tie which the audience wore. She leant forward and looked at his socks. She could see one at all events, since the foot it clothed rested on a rock—purple too—wunderbar! Barbara must see this audience; never would she again say the road was dull.

"Do you come every evening?" asked the audience.

"Along the road?" said Fräulein.

"Well, anywhere."

"My pupil, she abhors the road—up till now she has."

The audience was interested. "Where was the pupil?" With a gesture that comprised the whole country side, Fräulein indicated the whereabouts of the pupil, vagrant.

The audience nodded.

"See—look here"—one of the purple socks required attention—"I'll bring the poetry here to-morrow—for you to read—see?"

"And while I read?"

"Oh, that'll be all right."

He raised his hat and smiled at Fräulein and she smiled at him, and the audience walked away leaving an impression deeply engraved on her heart. She liked young men with clear, honest, blue eyes and the bloom of a peach still on their cheeks. She liked young men to be tall and straight and strong and gentle. She liked them to smile kindly at her. She liked them to wear blue shirts and purple ties, and above all—or below all, to be strictly correct—purple socks. Ah! life was full of poetry!

There was even some, such as it was, in the audience's pocket.

He came back. "I have found one bit."

"Of what—one bit?" said Fräulein.

"Poetry—it's about the sea in Cornwall."

"Will you not read it?"

The audience said he couldn't. He never could. But he would leave it for Fräulein to read.

"My sister wants someone to write music for it. A sort of wave accompaniment; coming up with the left hand, like waves breaking on the sands, you know! I should think if the hands crossed it would be frightfully doggy."

"That could I do," said Fräulein, nodding her head.

"The 'Hush' is supposed to sound like the wash of the waves," said the audience anxiously.

Fräulein began to read, while with her left hand she played an imaginary accompaniment on the rock beside her.

"That's right," said the audience; "I'll tell Jan you'll do it."

"Was it for this she got one guinea?" said Fräulein.

"No, not this one."

Fräulein read—

"Hush!" whisper the waves, "the bird-mother is keeping,
A watch overhead while her nestlings are sleeping."
"Hush!" whisper the waves, as they flow softly sighing
Across the gold sands where the sea-birds are crying.
"Hark!" whisper the waves, "to the lark's joyous singing,
A message from heaven to earth he is bringing."
"Peace," whisper the waves, to the heart that is aching,
Look over the sea where the shadows are breaking,
To the pathway of silver that leads to the west."
"Come," whisper the waves, "thou shalt here find thy rest."
"Rest," whisper the waves, "for God's angels are keeping
A watch overhead while His children are sleeping."
"Hush!" whisper the waves, "rest" whisper the waves,
"Hush!"

"You see what she means about the accompaniment? Left hand?" Fräulein nodded. She was busy counting the syllables. The audience walked away.

A few minutes later Fräulein clambered slowly down from her rock and started home. She had had an adventure such as her heart loved and seldom experienced. She had much to tell the barbarous one, should the barbarous one deserve to hear it.

The barbarous one returned in high spirits.

"Right over the moor did you go, my child?"

"Not right over, because of the grouse, my most foolish Fräulein; but we went miles and it was lovely—miles! Right up to the stalker's house—miles! Are you sorry, Fräulein, that die leibe Gott did not give you legs that can walk and breath that can breathe?"

"Der Gott, my child, der Gott!"

"Dare to be a Daniel! Dürfen einer Daniel sein!" sang Barbara. "Is that right? Oh, I love walking! I love the air, the hills, the streams, the heather, the sky, the very stones I walk on I love. I love the sun on the stems of the fir trees! I love the birds and

the beasts, only can I not love my darling, dull Fräulein! I have seen everyone, Fräulein!"

She sat down to supper and Fräulein, as was only right, told her no lady sat down so to supper, without washing or changing!

Barbara explained that she wasn't a lady—that was where Fräulein made a mistake. A lady was a thing of fashion—made by clever Fräuleins and Mademoiselles, and then only if they were very patient and kind.

A lady must think whether she uses a knife or not, a spoon or a fork. Whether she should say stays or corsets! "Yes, Fräulein, I know! I hear them talking downstairs. They can't know Mrs. So-and-So because she says that word that way instead of the other. And her husband does something! What, I don't know."

Barbara explained that until she came out she wasn't a lady. She could say things as she liked; she could do what she liked. She could wear what she liked! She could eat with both a spoon and a fork.

She was just a gloriously happy creature, worried to death only by a tiresome old Fräulein who did not really love her, else she would kinder be!

"When I come out that will be different! I shall change every night. I shall be dressed in silver tissue, dewdrops and diamonds. I shall not be allowed to speak to any man who has not twenty thousand a year, and I shall love a younger son madly, wildly, wickedly!"

"Do stop, my child, it is wicked the way you talk."

Barbara laughed.

"It is nothing to what I shall *do*. I've seen everybody—do you hear, Fräulein, everyone. Do you realize

what that means to one of my innocence and goodness ! The latest is lovely ! Fräulein it is serious ! She is just as beautiful as mother—and she's young—that's a serious thing for mother. She won't like it."

"My child, what things you say ! Your mother has her husband and her child, which are more than beauty."

"You are very innocent, my dearest instructress. It is I who instruct. You don't understand what it is to have a wonderful thing and then to lose it—not that mother is losing it—but she may be like she is for five years. The latest will be like she is—and more—for years. It's a serious thing, dear, solemn Fräulein."

"You are a strange child—half woman, half baby—"

"Divide me into three, dearest—child, woman and dev—"

"Barbara, I am serious ; do not say it."

"Well, don't lecture me ! Dad is a little serious just now—a little. He wants me to be such a good woman, quite forgetting, the darling, how dull it will be. He likes the latest, but he says I musn't call her that. Then there's a Captain Burney arrived—not by train—by motor. I'm sure he has a latest—his eyes twinkle, you know. What do you do when young men look at you like that ?"

"It is not nice to talk like that, my child."

"Like what ?"

"Like you say—young men's eyes twinkling !"

"Is it a wrong thing for eyes to do ? Anyhow, we can't prevent them doing it, can we ? Well, he can't fish—imagine ! I am going to teach him. Won't that be fun ? I don't think I like the other people much—Dad doesn't either. Why should one ask people to stay if one doesn't like them ? I shouldn't !"

"Then would you a big house like this never fill?"

"Nonsense, Fräulein; think what a lot of room you will take up by then, if you go on eating duck's skin like you are now! You will never be svelte as they are in novels."

At this Fräulein pretended to be really angry, and she told Barbara she was a heartless girl. Then came the scene all over again. The kneeling, penitent girl—then lowest prostration—humble petitions for mercy, and Fräulein reduced to a hopeless state of laughter and tears. So Barbara went to bed.

And downstairs Sir Everard talked to his latest, and Barbara's father to Frances Bailey, and her mother to her latest, and the rest of them played bridge, or did whatever they liked best, or probably disliked most, and Barbara slept with a look of seraphic goodness on her face, which Fräulein wondered at, seeing how bad she was awake. It showed there was some soul in the child. So her father thought when he stole up to look at her. He found Fräulein standing by the bed with a candle in her hand.

There was a look on the woman's face for which he felt a deep gratitude as well as pity. It was sad that a woman should look at another woman's child like that. "She looks an angel," she whispered.

"Keep her that, Fräulein, please."

It is easy for a man to ask such a thing when the whole world, the flesh and the devil were conspiring against one poor Fräulein. However, she promised to try, just to satisfy a look in the poor man's face. It was curious that, in looking at the sleeping child, each should see something in the other's face that called for pity. How amused Valde would have been!

In Fräulein's eyes there was one good man in this sad, wicked world called England. He was a hero—

beautiful, strong and manly. She hugged to herself the belief that she understood him—she alone. There were moments when she almost hated the beautiful Mrs. Raleigh for failing to understand so good a man. Did she feed him as she ought even? Fräulein had with her own eyes seen him go out for a long day's sport with cheese and biscuits in his pocket. He, a man with thousands, tens of thousands a year. It was not the way to keep a man's love.

CHAPTER VII

SIR EVERARD found his path beset with difficulties. Violet Egerton came up to and far beyond his expectations. He had never imagined her elusive ; but she was and very difficult to follow. He had perhaps been precipitate and had frightened her. She was so easily frightened. He and she had been sitting out on the terrace together ; as they talked he had drawn on the gravel with the point of his walking-stick and had quite naturally drawn a heart. It comes readily to the point of any walking-stick. It had alarmed her ; she had blushed and moved uneasily.

He had quickly changed it into an apple. It is easily done by the most indifferent draughtsman. A stalk and two leaves should set at rest the fears of the most timorous.

Violet had blushed again when she had seen the apple, ashamed naturally at having thought it a heart. Perhaps it was not, after all, an apple that Eve meant to offer Adam. Women have always been misunderstood.

Barbara, coming along the terrace a few minutes later, found it deserted, saw the apple of discord, and completed the picture with an Adam and Eve. Fräulein, following, saw the picture and hastily raked it out with the point of her umbrella assisted by the toe of her boot.

Barbara turned round and laughed.

Fräulein said she was a bad child and that her jovial countenance would bring her to sorrow!

"Has it quite gone, Fräulein? Toes broad and square are good for such things," said the barbarous one.

It was after that that Mrs. Egerton became elusive. If Sir Everard announced a sprained ankle because she was staying at home, she invariably changed her mind at the last moment and went out with the guns. A sprained ankle is a sprained ankle; once announced there is no getting out of it. He found it hard to forgive a morning spent alone with Fräulein. If he had only realised it, he might have derived great benefit from a morning spent in the society of so estimable a woman. She might have read aloud to him; most willingly would she so have done. But a man of Lang's temperament doesn't care to be read aloud to by a woman with a profile like Fräulein's. His soul derives no benefit from it. If he wanted to go fishing with Mrs. Egerton she had always promised to go with someone else.

She attached herself in a perfectly absurd way to Barbara. They were two children together. They made infantile jokes and laughed immoderately. But they made a delightful picture walking about arm in arm, and looked about the same age.

Barbara as a woman of the world was the elder. She it was who delighted to tease Sir Everard and knew exactly how to do it.

This went on for some time; then a change, a slight change, came over Mrs. Egerton. So slight that he at first didn't feel it. She began to find Barbara's devotion a little exacting. She was such a child. Sir Everard was right in finding her a little tiresome. Violet began to think she had been rather

cruel. If Everard Lang had known she was avoiding him from a sense of loyalty to Dick, he would have been delighted; that it was a temptation to her to go out fishing with the most interesting man she had ever met, he would have been enchanted; that she decided in her loyal mind that the mere fact of enjoying being with him shewed she should avoid him, he would have thought himself immensely lucky. For some time she pursued these tactics, while he pursued her. Then suddenly he began to find her easier of access, which distressed him. There was no subtlety about her—he was bound to admit it; nothing he couldn't understand. A woman understood was in his eyes no woman. She had capitulated too easily. She owed to her husband a greater resistance.

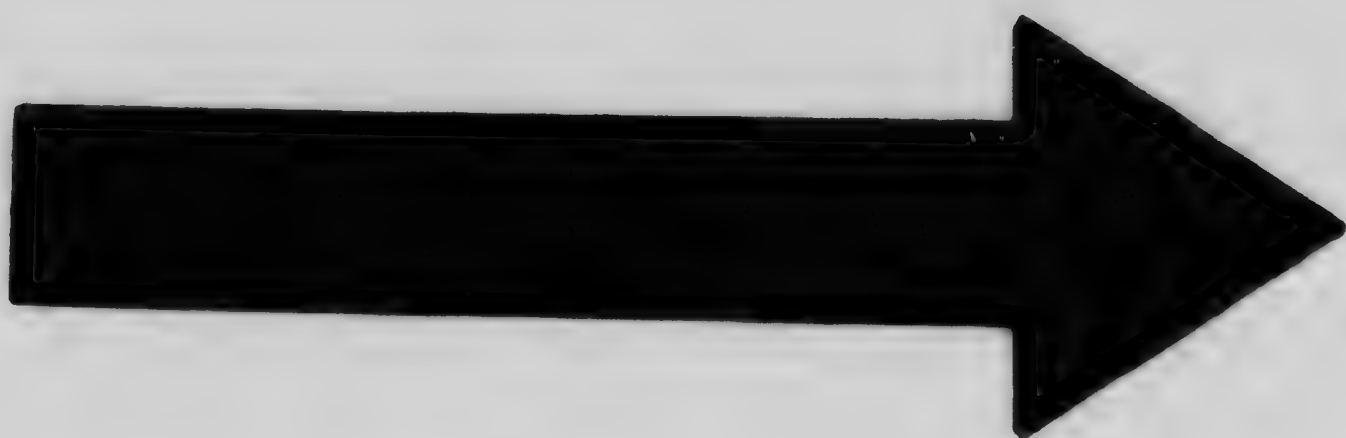
When once or twice he found her waiting for him, he suffered an acute sense of disappointment, and decided, for the sake of her social education, to cease to pursue. So he turned his attention elsewhere and was content to admire her from a distance.

Valde laughed; she thought he had begun to lose interest.

Frances knew he hadn't. She saw his game exactly. London, in the winter, would be a better place and time to proceed with the education.

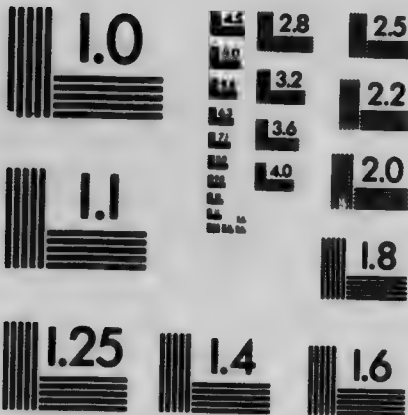
When Violet found she had not to avoid him, she began to wonder what had happened. On reflection, she was conscious of having, on two occasions, missed the point of his story. She did not realize that the point was that there was none. She had looked for the old-fashioned story that without a point could not exist, except in a society composed entirely of women.

It was evident she had disappointed him. He had found her dull and stupid. All of which he meant



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her to feel. So she took Dick's last letter out and sat on the heather, and tried to conjure up feelings that seemed dead. She tried to comfort herself with his words of adoration. She knew that, in the Locheven sense of the word, he wasn't smart. She tried to convince herself that she didn't mind. That it didn't in the least matter if he did think a woman smart, who wasn't. She missed him and longed for him to come back, or thought she did.

Hugh Raleigh found her in tears. His first impulse was to avoid her. A woman in tears was a terrifying thing. But she saw him and made room for him to sit down, if such a thing as making room is possible where there are miles of heather for anyone to sit on who chooses. Anyhow, she tucked her skirt under her and he sat beside her. He found her sympathetic and simple. She was different from the other women; she loved the country. It was like talking to Barbara, with just a difference that made her more understanding. He was sure she was as good as she was beautiful. As a butterfly spreads its wings in the sun he opened his heart to her. He told her of his ideals, his hopes—things he rarely spoke of to anyone. "I wish," he said, "you would see as much as you can of my Barbara."

He picked a piece of heather and gave it to Violet, and she put it into the buttonhole of her tweed coat.

"The child wants to be with people simpler than those she meets. She is in some ways too old, in other ways such a baby."

Violet said she loved Barbara and said all the things he most wanted to hear said about Barbara. What appealed to him in the child, she loved most. What she would like her to be as a woman was exactly what he wanted to see her.

"What sort of childhood had you ?" he asked.

And she told him. He realized as she talked that if the surroundings counted for anything, that Barbara was handicapped by the very fact of her environment. Mrs. Egerton had lots of brothers and sisters and a wonderful mother. All the glory of the childhood, he could see, was centred in that perfect relationship, and that made him think. Valde was in that sense of the word no mother.

She was proud of Barbara because the child was beautiful. Had she been less beautiful Valde would have been acutely disappointed ; not beautiful at all, bored to death.

He couldn't tell Violet anything of all that, and she, quite unconscious of the pain she inflicted, talked happily on about her life at home, and ended up, "And then I married."

It was so simple—a happy and natural culmination to a joyous and happy girlhood.

Hugh looked at her—at her delicate profile, at her sensitive mouth, at the dark fringe of eyelashes on her pink cheek, at her beautiful hands, and fell to wondering what it must have been to a man to marry a girl like that.

Why, if she looked and was as he imagined her to be, did she allow herself to be talked about in connection with Everard Lang ? Valde had so instilled into him that Violet Egerton was there for the one purpose of meeting Lang that he took it for granted that she was, at least, acquiescent.

"Tell me about your husband."

She talked less glibly about her husband. Somehow or other, in some strange way Dick was becoming almost unreal. It seemed to her as if their short married life had been some bewildering dream. She

seemed a girl again with just a difference that made life difficult. Dick was becoming a part of a life that was losing its reality in the haziness of the past. She was miserable to find that the time no longer went slowly. A life she had vowed unbearable was becoming interesting—horribly interesting—and she was beginning to enjoy admiration. Even with Hugh Raleigh she was conscious of a pleasurable sense of being admired. His eyes expressed his admiration of her beauty. All the men paid homage to her. The women laughed at her for not knowing her power. Most of them began to make allusions, laughingly, to the absent husband, and she was angry to find that she was not more angry.

Another thing that worried her were her mother's letters. They were full of love and a longing to see her. When was she coming home?

For the first time in her life she didn't want to go home. There had never been, until Dick went away, a moment in her life when she had not flown with joy to those outstretched arms. Dick had even found fault with her for her devotion to her people. Now the thought of the quiet village life appalled her. She knew she would find the people dull. They would show surprise if she smiled when her husband was away. They would drop their voices when they saw her; look sad and hold her hand while they said how much they felt for her. They might even hold her by both hands while they expressed their sympathy. Both hands, in the village, implied a very unreserved expression of feeling. No, she could not bear it.

Of course she could not tell Hugh Raleigh all this, any more than he could tell her about Valde. It was a pity she didn't tell him something of it. He would

have counselled her to go straight to that mother ; to those simple and sympathetic people.

She would hate it and of that, knowing it, she was ashamed. However, she thought, she was young and it was only natural she should enjoy herself. Dick would wish her to.

One day the truth forced itself upon her with horrible insistence. As a protest she tried to make herself unhappy and found she couldn't. She was really quite happy and enjoying herself. The wound was healed ; she could touch it without wincing. With a last gasp of loyalty she went to Valde and said she must go home.

Valde said, "Quite impossible, my dear child. I cannot have my party spoilt. You are too beautiful a thing to lose."

She stayed.

Frances Bailey took her for a long walk and talked, with less than her usual tact, of Dick. Violet found the walk long and Frances dull. Half way home they overtook Mrs. Listowen and Sir Everard. Violet walked home with him and found the walk too short. To make it longer they went round by the gardens. They had still much to say when they got home ; but for some reason they were silent.

When he got in, Sir Everard looked up the map of Africa. He followed, with the point of a dry pen, a route. He frowned. It was longer than he had thought. Frances Bailey on coming in had gone straight to her room. She sat down at the writing table. She dipped her pen into the ink ; before she had decided what to write and to whom to write it, the pen was dry. She dipped it into the ink-pot and addressed an envelope to Violet's mother.

Then she took up a sheet of note-paper. She

paused and looked out of the window for inspiration. She saw fir trees, birch woods and hills—distant hills purpled in shadow—and clouds. They failed to inspire her in the writing of a letter which, to begin with, she felt she had no business to write.

She tore up the envelope addressed to Mrs. Charlton and addressed one to "The Lady Blatherwake." Then she wrote:

"DEAR LADY BLATHERWAKE,

"I am Frances Bailey. You are too kind to be angry with me for writing to you and too just.

"Your lovely niece is staying here and so is Sir Everard Lang. You know his reputation. It's not of the worst but it's quite bad enough to make a husband very unhappy if things reached him far away in Africa. Lies travel quicker than truth. If only the truth reached him there is nothing that could matter. But the danger lies in the fact that Everard Lang is rather pleased than otherwise that danger should be apprehended where his name is associated with anyone very lovely. It is the only notoriety he craves for. He could get much of another kind, as he is really very clever, if he weren't such an idiot.

"Could you possibly get Violet home on some excuse? I don't want to frighten her mother: there's nothing to frighten her about. I know you will understand. What Violet doesn't understand is that she is not singular in being admired by Sir Everard; that not to be admired by him, at some time of one's career, argues a social oblivion. You do understand what I mean?

"Yours,

"FRANCES BAILEY."

Then she stamped what she felt to be the most horrible letter she had ever written.

"It isn't," she said to herself, "so much that he is taking too much notice of her as that she is beginning to feel that he ought to take more. He means her to feel that."

CHAPTER VIII

IN view of her promise to Mr. Raleigh to keep Barbara awake as she looked asleep, Fräulein felt it incumbent upon her not to seek to introduce Barbara to the audience. So the memory of the purple tie and socks she treasured, and refrained from telling the child what would naturally be of enormous interest to her.

If a young man in a purple tie and socks to match interested a Fräulein, he would undoubtedly more than interest a creature somewhere about his own age, with a taste of her own in ties and stockings. When Fräulein mused on her own matrimonial chances they always involved at least one elderly professor with spectacles and a fatal facility for wearing holes in his socks. The colour of the socks she had never imagined other than fawn or grey—colours that Frances Bailey would describe as “dun.”

It was unworthy of Fräulein to leave the high road, but she felt convinced would be waiting the beautiful young man, with the indifferent poems of his sister for her to read, and take the rugged road up the glen.

Barbara was enchanted. She loved to see Fräulein glued to a rock, with neither the courage to go on nor the determination to go back. That Fräulein should of her own accord afford Barbara such amusement was wonderful. She little thought it was in order to keep her, Barbara, pure and unspotted from the world that Fräulein was so self-sacrificing.

"This one, Fräulein," said Barbara, indicating a rock higher and more slippery than its fellows.

"My child!" expostulated Fräulein, "there neither could I get neither could I return."

"Yes, you could—courage—here take my hand—now!"

Fräulein jumped and landed by chance on the rock. Once there she must stay. Barbara knew that. So she sat herself down, drew up her knees, put her arms round them and rocked herself backwards and forwards.

"Don't you love rocks—and things, Fräulein," said Barbara.

"Yes, my child, the good God has made all things beautiful—that is to say, in their place."

"Yours is not on the rock then, darling—your legs, Fräulein! Your skirt is too high held!"

Fräulein shrieked, and in her efforts to remedy the state of things floundered, which amused Barbara.

"Now, Fräulein," she said, "if you can stay quiet one moment I will tell you the news of the great world—The Missendens have arrived at Benduich."

"So! and who may they be?"

"Sir Everard would shudder at your not knowing! But a German can't be expected to know the British peerage, can she?"

Barbara looked at Fräulein very seriously. Fräulein quailed under the directness of the gaze. The child's eyes were so blue.

"It is constantly a thing so newly made," said Fräulein apologetically.

"This one is quite old, but rather poor—Claridge has arrived."

"Claridge? It is a name that comes back to me."

"Not the hotel, Fraufrau. He's a thing called a Viscount. The mothers of girls like the thing very much. This one is the sort of young man you would call *wunderschon*! With a so-good expression."

"Fair!" said Fräulein, balancing herself with difficulty on the rock.

"Ish—fairish."

"Does he like poetry?"

"I'm sure he doesn't," said Barbara indignantly; "he's a good all-round sportsman. Dad says so."

"He does not know about poetry, that is certain, but he had the courtliness to listen."

"When?"

"That is telling," said Fräulein, looking mysterious.

"Legs—Fräulein. Es ist schrecklich!"

"Mein Gott, I am growing stiff and old on this rock—your hand, my child!"

"Not until you have told me all."

So poor Fräulein, in spite of her promise, described the purple tie and the socks and everything.

In return, Barbara helped her down from the rock and they went home.

Life was full of poetry truly! Here was the young man, and a lord, too. All so well arranged! She must hurry up with Barbara's education. Her irregular verbs were shocking, such as would disgrace any peeress—however young and lovely. There was decency in all things to be considered. She trusted no one had seen her legs as she stood on the rock. So Fräulein mused on things in general, as she walked home.

She was awakened from her dreams by Barbara telling her that Captain Burny was coming to tea in the schoolroom.

Barbara was going to teach him to fish. She

despised him not a little for not knowing. A man in her eyes was no man who differed in any respect from her father. Captain Burney felt this, but put up with her disdain for the sake of the fun he anticipated.

Fräulein, Barbara and Captain Burney sat down to tea.

Fräulein glanced at Barbara ; never had she looked so good. It showed that what she told the child did have an effect, after all. Captain Burney glanced at Barbara and vowed she was the loveliest kid he had ever seen. He didn't think she looked particularly good.

A cast, in soak, in a saucer, distressed Fräulein. She would have liked to do the honours with dignity for this Captain Burney who talked so pleasantly of Germany and the Germans.

He had been there ? Of course, or else would he not so nicely talk. He felt a great admiration for the German army ! So ! He had forgiven the Emperor the telegram ! So !

Fräulein beamed. She enjoyed the tea party, so did Barbara, so did Burney.

After tea Barbara went down with him to inspect his fishing kit. If he wasn't a fisherman he knew what a fisherman needed. That, he said, was simple enough. Barbara nodded. Of course, it was a matter of money and Farlow. And you have never fished before ? "

He said he had, with a worm, which perhaps was true.

Barbara said she couldn't understand his wanting to fish instead of shoot. She supposed he *could* shoot ?

He said he could, and wondered she didn't understand.

"You must feel an idiot, not being able to fish at your age, of course," said Barbara.

He wondered what she thought his age was.

Off they started. He, remembering just in time that he knew nothing about fishing, said what an idiot he was to have forgotten his float! How she laughed. "Now," she said, with tears in her eyes, "whatever you do, don't tie yourself in knots. I wish you wouldn't make me laugh so, I can't see to put this fly on!" They were down by the river. Burney watched her putting on the fly. He was glad she had reminded him of tying himself in knots. He wondered if he could do it. Of hooking himself into her skirt, he might make a certainty. He did it in one!

It annoyed him, the promptitude with which she took out a pair of scissors and cut the fly out.

"Aren't they ducky, stumpy scissors?" she said.

"Fearfully ducky."

"Rounded ends so that they don't stick into you, see?"

He examined them carefully. They were delightful, so was the scolding she gave him; in fact everything was delightful.

"I suppose," she said, "I had better stay with you for a bit?"

"Why, of course, how am I to learn without? Here, you take the rod and show me!"

Barbara objected. It was not the way to learn. He must do it himself.

"Take hold of my wrist—is that a good way?"

Barbara thought not.

He tried to cast and successfully failed.

Barbara encouraged him to go on, which he did, and got caught up in a bush. He was really vexed at that. It was waste of time and entailed a separation.

Barbara laughed and vowed he was hopeless. She took the rod and threw a very creditable line. He wished he could do as well! She told him there was nothing like practice. He agreed, nothing in the world like it! So long as she was with him to see he didn't get into bad habits.

"Oh, why did you talk! I have missed a fish! A beauty!"

"A whopper! He'll come again!" he said.

"No, he won't—I can't reach him!"—this in despair.

"Give me the rod!"

"No—no—you'll never get him! Think of the bushes—my skirt!"

"One moment!" he whispered, "don't—move!"

He took the rod—out flew the line—straight over the fish!

"Bravo!" she whispered.

Suddenly he remembered he must lose either his fish or his teacher.

"Ah!" said Barbara, "you did splendidly—but you see you hadn't an idea what to do. You ought to have struck—so—a turn of the wrist! But you threw a splendid line."

He swore it was the wind behind him. He trembled to think what a narrow escape he had had.

After a time Barbara remembered a promise made to Fräulein, and she said she must go. "Oh, no," expostulated Burney; "do stay."

She shook her head; she must go; he must stay behind and practice. Fräulein would be waiting for her.

"Decent old thing, Fräulein," he said.

"She's not really old, poor, dear Fräulein!"

"Why poor dear; she's got all she wants, hasn't she?"

"Not all—there's something she wants dreadfully."

"Poor dear, can't you give it to her?"

Barbara shook her head. No one could give it to her.

"What sort of thing?" He didn't in the least want to know; but it marked time.

As a matter of fact he wasn't thinking of Fräulein.

"What sort of thing?" he repeated.

Barbara shook her head.

"Is it something you would like yourself?"

"Not particularly—some day I shall; I've promised Donald to."

"Who's Donald?"

"The old keeper; he's a darling. I can't disappoint him."

"Has Fräulein promised him, too?"

"Oh, no, Donald wouldn't want her to!"

"Tell me what it is. I might help Fräulein. I like her and you know I'm rather uncomfortably rich—see?"

"You couldn't. Fräulein didn't tell me she wants it. I know it—by something she marked in a book of poetry."

"Shall I guess?"

Burney sat down on a rock beside Barbara.

"Better not," said Barbara, getting up. "Oh, look at that darling baby rabbit."

"D'you love baby rabbits?"

"You've said half," said Barbara.

"Half what?"

"Half what Fräulein wants."

"Rabbit?"

"No, the other!"

"Oh——"



"SHE TOOK THE ROD AND THREW A VERY CREDITABLE LINE."

Burney filled his pipe. The beastly thing wouldn't draw.

"Now I must go," said Barbara. "You won't tell Fräulein?"

He promised faithfully.

He watched Barbara out of sight. From another point she was watched by Claridge. From behind the cover of a rock he saw her coming, and praised the fates that ordained such luck to pass his way. As Barbara got close to him he rose from behind his rock and looked as unconcerned as he could at the view.

"We have met," he said, putting out his hand.

"I know," said Barbara; "a fourth of June, wasn't it?"

"*The* fourth of June," he corrected her, whereupon she called him a "billy." She had seen his point, that was all he wanted.

"Do sit down here," he pleaded, "it's a ripping view."

"Do you like views?"

"Ra-ther," he said, looking at her.

Barbara sat down. "I called you Tommy then, didn't I?"

"Everyone does."

"I see," said Barbara, nodding her head.

"Have you been fishing?" he asked.

"No, Claridge, I haven't."

"Rot, calling me that! Watching Burney, then?"

"Not exactly."

"You'll never get such a chance again."

"Chance?"

"Yes, chance. Take a lesson or two, I should. My governor says he's the finest fisherman living—dry fly at all events."

"The—finest—fisherman—living!" said Barbara.

"'Al' anyway," said Tommy, remembering that Mr. Raleigh was probably the finest everything in the world.

"B-e-a-s-t!" said Barbara.

Tommy sat up at this. He felt it was unmerited.

"Not you!" she said. "Here!" beckoning.

Tommy came closer. They put their heads together—rather close together—and they made plans.

Barbara's for deep machiavellian methods were voted the best. She and Tommy parted the best of friends. They had a secret and a mutual enemy. An Fräulein didn't tell Barbara she had met Tommy until forced to, at the point of the rock, Barbara wouldn't tell her now.

But she went to her mother's room and found her dressing for dinner. There was nothing Barbara loved better than to see her mother dressing. "You are lovely, mother!" she said.

Valde smiled.

"What do you say when men tell you you are lovely?"

Valde hesitated. What she said varied with circumstances; Barbara didn't wait to hear.

"Tommy—I mean Claridge—walked up from the river with me. In the garden he picked a rose and he said, 'You're just like this rose, only much more lovely!'"

"And I said, 'Don't be an ass!' Was that right, Mother?"

Barbara had got it off her conscience. She knew her mother would laugh. She wondered why she hugged her.

Tommy went home deeply in love and as unhappy

as it is possible to be under the circumstances. At twenty the possibilities are tremendous.

He sat on Jan's bed that night, and asked her how long she thought it would last? Jan, anxious to be a real help, hit the happy medium she thought, knowing Tommy, in saying a fortnight.

Tommy groaned, wondering if he could bear it.

CHAPTER IX

BURNEY fell an easy victim to the plot hatched by Barbara and Tommy. He vowed he would rather fish than shoot. A light in Barbara's eyes should have warned him. But he couldn't read the eyes of a girl of that age. He only thought her the prettiest kid he had ever seen.

Hugh Raleigh, thinking Burney was being kind to Barbara, begged her to let Burney off. Barbara said no. "Don't ask me, Dad! I want to take him to the Shepherd's pool; don't interfere, please, darling!"

Of course he had no wish to interfere. Burney wanted to fish, Barbara to take him to the Shepherd's pool; so that settled it.

Nevertheless, he put a mark against Burney's name.

"Where is the Shepherd's pool?" asked Burney, hoping to hear it was miles off.

"Oh, eight or nine miles from here," said Barbara. "You won't mind the drive? My pony flies!"

Burney said he was sorry the pony flew.

Barbara paid no attention to that, but said, "Now listen to my instructions: First of all you must take the flies I tell you to take—I have consulted Duncan. Then you must take waders. If you haven't any—of course you haven't; waders are no use in Piccadilly, are they?—there are lots in the house; you can borrow a pair. Then you—we—will take luncheon. We will drive straight to the pool, and while you put

up the rod I will go on and see old Donald. I will leave the pony there."

"You shall put up my rod. I will take the pony."

"No, no, Donald would be furious. He calls me the light of his eyes. Would he call you that?"

Burney said it was possible. Because no one had ever called him that, it didn't show no one ever would.

Everything was arranged. Burney was the most docile of pupils, Barbara the loveliest of teachers.

Burney began to think it was hard on the chap who had to wait at least three years before Barbara could marry.

It was a form of self-pity. There were moments when it became acute.

"I hope it won't rain," he said, as they drove along.

Barbara screwed up her eyes and nose and looked up into the cloudless sky. She was adorable like that.

"Not a chance," she said; "it would be better for the fishing if it did."

Burney said what did the fishing matter? She said she hated people who weren't keen.

He promised that so long as she would teach him, he should be keen.

"I have brought a ripping lunch," she said.

"Tea, too?"

She thought he would have had enough by tea time. He doubted it. He swore the distance was nothing. It couldn't be nine miles!

"What do *you* think, Groodlelums?" she said, addressing the pony.

"What a name!" said Burney. "What does it mean?"

"Don't you know? It's the nice part of a beef-

steak pudding—all the little bits and the gravy. Fräulein loves it."

"But why call the pony Groodlelums?"

"Because I love him; he's the nicest part of my life."

They both laughed, and he wished the distance twice as long.

"There's the going back, remember!" said Barbara.

He was looking forward to that already.

"Now," she said, as she drew up, "I can't drive right down to the river, but I will wait here if you will unload. There's the luncheon basket—the waders—the gaff—rods—what a load! Can you manage it?"

"It's nothing," said the man, who was never known to carry anything he could possibly help.

"I will wait till you start and then I'll drive up to old Donald's. I shan't stay there long."

"I will put up your rod for you. How do you do it?"

"You ought to know by this time!"

He laughed.

When she had seen the luncheon basket safely deposited on a large stone, she waved her hand and drove off. "Don't forget the float!" she cried.

He looked at her vivid, laughing face and pitied the poor beggars in the years to come. Would she then wear that distracting green hat; her hair in that delicious fat pig-tail? Her hair wouldn't be allowed to blow across her face as it did now. She could never be quite as lovely grown up.

"Little devil," he muttered; "delicious little devil."

He watched her drive away, until she was out of sight, waving her hand and laughing.

She went to see old Donald and gave him the tobacco

she had brought him. She also gave him one of the happiest moments in his life. She was the light of his waning days. From the moment he had first seen her, a baby in long clothes, he had adored her. He had always gone down to the station to meet the family when they came North. He had always looked eagerly for the boy who jumped from the train and rushed up to him, with the words, "Well, Donald?"

Donald looked forward for months every year to the moment when he should hear those words. They meant so much to him. They were "grand friends" he and the boy—"grand friends."

If Hugh, at that age, had been asked who he loved best in the world, it would have been a struggle to his honest soul to have said any name than Donald's.

Then the boy grew to be a man and married. Donald went down to meet the bride. She frightened him: she was too beautiful; he was afraid to shake her by the hand. She looked as though she might break.

Just as he had always said it, Hugh said, "Well, Donald?"

And Donald said, "She's fine, just fine."

A year later he went down to meet the baby. Small as she was he felt no fear of breaking her. He was allowed to hold her. Hugh, himself, put her into the old man's arms. "Well, Donald?" he said. "She's just wonderful!" said the old man.

It was one of the moments to which Hugh loved best to look back: when he put his baby into the arms of the good old man, who was so big and so gentle, whose face was so rugged and so tender.

From that day Donald had been Barbara's most devoted servant and friend. But he was old now

and past his work. It was she who must come to him.

"There is no horse for hire near here, and no cart or anything within miles, is there, Donald?"

"What was the bairn thinking of? There was nothing. The ponies were on the hill."

"And no way of getting back to the Lodge but walking?"

"Walking? The bairn was walking?"

He stretched out a shaking hand to reach his stick that stood in the corner. He must walk with her.

"No, darling Donald, I'm driving. I only wanted to know. There is no way?"

"No way whatever." Barbara sighed. It was a sigh of contentment. After a talk with Donald she got into the pony cart and drove off towards home, as fast as the pony could go.

Captain Burney should see that she was not to be made fun of with impunity. She got home in time to join the guns at luncheon, and Claridge, who had taken Burney's place, listened to the tale of revenge with delight.

"By Jove, it's simply enough to make one smile! Rods, waders, 'slip on,' I'll bet, luncheon basket! Poor Burney—he won't want to learn fishing again in a hurry."

While Barbara sat on the heather eating an excellent luncheon—one calculated, according to Fräulein, to keep from straying the most faithless of husbands—Burney was raging.

What could keep Barbara so long? Was the idiot of a keeper ill? And if ill, why should she stay with him? There wasn't a fish moving in the place—blazing sun and no water. And they were driving the best moor!

Donald swears "here was no fish moving the day." And he would never have gone against Barbara.

By foul means or fair the fish was there. Barbara refused to eat any of it, so Fräulein ate a double share—at least Barbara said she did.

Burney told everyone, with a twinkle in his eye, that he had enjoyed his day immensely—good sport and a delightful walk home.

"Out with it, Peter, old chap," said Hugh Raleigh, when they were alone in the library that night.

"I'm inclined to out with something else. I'm inclined, Hugh, old chap, to ask you for something. You won't give it to me."

There was a silence, "Don't look so furious—it's only this—if I wait, may I take my chance with the rest?"

Raleigh threw his cigar into the fire. The two men stood looking at one another, like two animals at bay.

"I said—may I take my chance?"

"Peter, old chap, I've never seen a man I think good enough—I should be sorry if she married you."

"D—— it, my cigar's out."

"I'm sorry, Peter!"

"My dear old boy—you're quite right, of course—there are few of us who wouldn't live our lives over again," he laughed.

"I'm laughing at Fräulein."

"Why?" said Hugh, taking a cigarette and lighting it.

"Oh, I don't know—a bit sentimental, isn't she? I suppose we don't understand them—funny things, women."

It was an opinion to which Hugh had given utterance not so long ago, yet he resented Peter holding it.

"She's a good woman," he said, a little sententially.

"I'm certain of that," said Peter; "shines with it—but she's—plain."

Later, Hugh told Valdo he didn't wish Barbara to go about with Burney.

"My dear Hugh, what are you worrying your dear old head about now? Barbara is a perfect child."

"And Peter isn't."

"A perfect man! I'm quite sure he isn't. But you might, at least, give him credit for being a gentleman!"

CHAPTER X

No answer had come from Lady Blatherwake to Frances's letter; no summons for Violet.

Frances began to wonder if she had taken too much upon herself; if Lady Blatherwake were angry with her.

It so happened that Lady Blatherwake was abroad and the letter took some days to reach her.

Directly it reached her she read it; thought a while, wondered if Frances wanted to marry the man herself, decided not; lit a cigarette and wrote as follows: "Dear Frances, I appreciate your motive in writing—in fact, more than that, I am grateful. I agree with you in preferring a man who can sin splendidly to one who amuses himself by playing at being wicked. If you weren't a girl I could write more on this subject; but thank you, my dear. You have something of your father's honesty, for which I love you. Violet shall have her summons."

Meanwhile, Barbara set herself to amuse the house party. This time she did not even consult Tommy. She announced a unique entertainment to be given, after dinner, in the big drawing-room. Everyone was invited. The nature of the entertainment was kept a profound secret. Was anyone to know? Not a single soul.

Barbara spent an afternoon alone in her bedroom. Judging by what happened afterwards, it was difficult to imagine what could have occupied her for a whole afternoon.

It was afterwards asked : Had Fräulein not known ? Certainly not ! Did no one remember how she had deplored the fact of her ignorance—how she had said it was unkind of Barbara not, at least, to tell her ?

Yes, Frances remembered perfectly.

Fräulein wrote the invitations—"Unique" in gold, "Entertainment" in blue. The colour scheme satisfied her Teutonic mind.

Everyone, of course, accepted the invitation. Hugh Raleigh was certain his darling was going to recite something in German. Fräulein looked at him and nodded. She, too, was certain it was something in German her pupil would recite.

No one else thought anything about it except that if Barbara gave an entertainment they would of course go to it.

After dinner, therefore, everyone assembled in the big drawing-room. At the end of the room the carpet was rolled up : the parquet floor was bare. The electric light was so arranged that the improvised stage could be lighted while the rest of the room was in darkness.

At the left of the stage was the piano ; at the piano, Fräulein. Everyone took their seats. At the tinkle of a bell Fräulein was to begin Mendelssohn's "Spring Song."

The bell tinkled ; Fräulein played the first bars of the "Spring Song."

Suddenly a thought struck Frances. She got up quickly and went and stood within reach of the electric light switches.

"Be quiet, Frances !" said someone.

On to the improvised stage glided a figure, exquisite in its youthful beauty and grace. It stood for a second with arms outstretched—a sight so

lovely that something caught at Frances's throat. The innocent purity of the child was so touching—but—Frances put out her hand and switched off the light.

The women, some of them laughed shrilly. The men were silent, with the exception of one who was young enough to voice his feelings in, "I say, what a shame!"

Frances heard someone leave the room, and guessed it was Hugh.

Fräulein's calls were unanswered. No one was ready to tell her why the lights had gone out. Frances was the only one who could have told her that, like a flash, it had come upon her what Barbara was going to do, and that in obedience to an impulse she had gone and stood within reach of the electric light switch. Fräulein would have questioned Frances's right to an intuition where Barbara was concerned.

That night an outraged, rebellious, and miserable child lay on her bed, crying into the pillows. What had she done? Nothing! In illustrated papers she had seen pictures of girls dancing like that! Her mother had gone to see them—her father—everyone went to see them. She had heard men discussing them. If it was wrong for her, it was wrong for them. It was wrong of people to go.

Frances going downstairs met Hugh. She could see by the set expression of his face that he was desperately angry and felt it was impossible he should go to Barbara as he was. "Don't go to Barbara."

"I must."

"Hugh, don't—no child should ever see anyone who loves her look as you look now. If those we love turn from us in anger, when we most need their love, what——" She laid her hand on his arm and drew him into the deep window-seat.

"That those men should have seen her—Lang and Burney!" he said.

"Hugh—they didn't see her—it was a second, if they did——"

Frances didn't like to say that Saul was blinded by a vision from heaven. Hugh wouldn't have understood her, or seen it from her point of view. It was not to be expected. "It's no use going to that child and making her more unhappy than she is. We've got to think of her—she did it in sublime innocence."

"What was her mother doing?"

"How can you feel so bitterly about your child? You should feel nothing but love for her! You should long only to help her and comfort her. Can't you see the perfect, the divine innocence of it? I am ashamed—not of Barbara—of——"

"She's not your child, Frances. You don't understand men as I do."

Frances hesitated; she didn't know what to say. "You must not go to her unless you promise you will not let her, in any way, imagine she has done anything except transgress the rules of the schoolroom."

Hugh laughed, "It seems to me women are curiously lax."

"To please me!"

"It's disgraceful that the child's mother should not be the one to plead for her. Valde has no sense of responsibility; — she is bringing up the child to be——"

Frances laid her hand on his arm, "Don't say it! You will be sorry all your life."

They sat in silence. She glanced at him; his face was tense with misery, his eyes were burning, his soul was hurt and wounded.

"Frances," he said, "there are things one can't talk about!"

Frances nodded: she knew. Hugh's loyalty to Valde had always seemed to her one of his finest qualities.

"Perhaps," he said, "I have never really understood Valde. She is so different in every way to me. I must seem to her very dull and stupid, I know that. I imagined she loved me, as I loved her, when we married. I believe she did. The first great disappointment I felt was when I discovered that she hoped she wouldn't have any children. It seemed to me that it was what we wanted. We were not happy enough to bear the disappointment; we couldn't make it up to each other. When Barbara came, I can't tell you what she was to me—the wonder of it! I thought it must change Valde: that she would be glad now that the baby had come. She seemed quite indifferent—when the child was old enough to be pretty she took more notice of her. She was proud of her beauty. She's that now; but I believe it's all she cares about. I want Barbara to be different—you will be amused, but when I saw the child was fond of dolls, I was delighted. I want her to be a woman. I want her to be everything that a woman ought to be. I don't want her to be a Mrs. Listowen—I would rather she died. The child has so much that is good in her, I want——"

"I understand just what you feel, Hugh," said Frances, "and feeling that, it is quite impossible that you, at such a moment, should fail her. Go to her—let her feel she can turn to you in all her troubles. I should have known you could not hurt her."

He went. Later when she heard him leave the room she went and knocked at the door, "It's Frances!" she said.



"VALDE WALKED RESTLESSLY UP AND DOWN THE ROOM."

Barbara held out her arms. "I knew you'd come!" she said. "Father says he understands—he's a darling—he——. Who laughed?" she said, fiercely. "I hate them—who put out the light?"

"Some one who loves you very dearly, darling."

"Then whoever it was——"

The child buried her burning face in Frances's shoulder, and Frances soothed her.

There was Valde to appease and Frances went to her room dreading the interview.

Valde walked restlessly up and down the room, and Frances stood with one arm on the mantelpiece, looking down, because she was afraid to face Valde.

"It is really too bad, Frances. Hugh is absolutely mad with unreasoning rage—he forgets the child is mine—I love her just as much as he does. I will not be spoken to as he has spoken to me to-night. Fräulein was an idiot—that I allow—she must go. Why didn't she know what Barbara was doing? A governess and a maid—with nothing else to do—they might at least see the child keeps her clothes on. Victorine says she gave Barbara some yards of chiffon—it makes me cry with laughing—did you ever see anything so beautiful as she is? I must say I was pleased. What a pity she can't do it when she grows up——"

"Don't Valde!" said Frances.

"Don't be a goose! You are all too silly and idiotic for words—there's nothing to make a fuss about—it's all too silly and upsetting. Men are horrid, really—even Hugh looks for the worst in everything—it's nothing to those——"

"Don't, Valde; don't!"

"I will—why should I stifle all that is natural in me—pretend to be what I'm not? I suppose I am a

bad woman at heart—the conventions of society prevent me from being really bad—I stand to lose too much. If I did the perfectly natural thing, I should say, ‘Wasn’t it too killing! Barbara came into the drawing-room with very little clothes on!’ The kind of people I like would say, ‘How killing!’ and that would be the end of it. Hugh will drive me to desperation some day. Why can’t he take it all as a joke! Why doesn’t he laugh! Even on our honeymoon I found myself apologizing a thousand times for being myself—and he kindly forgave me! It didn’t occur to me at first that he didn’t admire me as much as I admired him. I remembered his profile, as a matter for thanksgiving, in my prayers for weeks after we were married. It was a revelation to me when I found he was sorry for me. Me! That he married me to get me away from my surroundings! He was quite right. What chance had I of being anything but what I am—with those surroundings! My beauty! It dragged me down as a child; it drags me down now, I suppose. I was sold to the highest bidder. That he should have been a man like Hugh was wonderful, I suppose! I ought to have gone down on my knees every day of my life and thanked God! I did, at first—then I got tired of living at that altitude. Sometimes I feel if he had been less good it would have been my duty to help him—to lift him up: whereas, now, I know I could never do that. My best could never reach up to his worst. He has never needed me, never. The goodness and purity of women is always his cry—not knowing that the mere fact of demanding it stifles what there is of it in me. I find it difficult to be good, but I could forgive so beautifully. I have come to the definite conclusion that it is the good

people who do most harm in the world, much more than the bad. With a bad person I am, comparatively speaking, a saint; the good make me long to be bad. Oh, if the good could be more generous in their judgment!"

Frances listened in despair. There was some truth in what Valde said. It was possible Hugh had not understood her. She was a creature of caprice.

"Frances!" she said, suddenly, "such a splendid idea!" She was laughing and radiant: the storm of the moment before had passed. "Make a man of Hugh—humanize him"—she took the girl's hands—"make him fall in love with you—do, darling. He thinks you so good. It would reinstate me, at no cost to yourself. He would never demand more of me than he could give."

Before Frances could say anything there was a knock at the door.

"Who's there?" said Valde sharply.

Hugh walked in. "Don't go, Frances!" she said.

"Please go," Hugh said, and she went.

The husband and wife stood face to face. As they stood so, she wondered if he thought her beautiful. He never thought of her beauty except as the instrument of a great deal of his torture. He wanted to say what he had to say without hurting her more than was necessary. She wanted to say as little as she could on a subject that bored her to tears.

Whether she hurt him or not, she did not much mind. He had bored her horribly.

"Valde!" he said, holding out his hand.

"Don't be a goose, Hugh—it's no use coming and putting out your paw like a dog. You can't one moment say the things you said to me and expect

everything to be all right the next moment. You made a most absurd and ridiculous scene."

"I don't think we need go over all that again; it's done and can't be undone. It's not within the powers of your imagination, I suppose, to guess what I felt when my child stood there before those men!"

"Your child, Hugh? That's what's so absurd—your child! You talk of a child as if it were some wonderful and extraordinary thing given as a reward to Hugh Raleigh, for good conduct—the gutters are full of children. What influence have they on the lives of their parents? Do they—the parents—see anything so wonderful in having children? Half of them are there, poor little wretches, because their parents are drunkards!"

"Valde—don't—are these things nothing to you? You talk of them as if they didn't matter. I want you, now, to break up this infernal party: it's so beastly unwholesome. I can't bear to see Lang making a fool of that girl—and Frances."

"What's the matter with Frances? I thought she, at least, was perfection—of course she's in love with you! That's evident—Hugh, dear old Hugh—you may fall in love with her—do."

She laughed; she held out her hands to him.

"For Heaven's sake stop, Valde; you must be mad! Frances!" he laughed bitterly, "she's making an idiot of herself with Guy Blacker."

Valde started. "With Guy Blacker, how—do you know?"

"I've no business to know—certainly not to repeat it; but to you I suppose I may say, I saw, by chance, a letter he wrote to Frances."

"A letter?" said Valde. What did he say?"

"I don't know."

"When was it?"

"In town—the night you came north—I saw it by mistake. She promised to have nothing more to do with him, but he's not a man ——"

"Hugh—it's not Frances!"

"I'm afraid it is. I should not have said anything; but there comes a point when it is necessary to make you see what all this leads to—Frances of all girls!"

"Hugh?" said Valde, "Why do you believe it?"

"It's difficult—but the evidence!"

"I should sooner believe in Frances than in my own eyes!"

There was a silence. Valde felt that Hugh watched her. She sat quite still, afraid to speak. Did he know? Was he testing her? Giving her a chance? Added to everything else, was he to discover her a traitor to her friend? Perhaps he really believed it! Imagine believing anything of Frances! What fools men were! Hugh was always looking out for goodness and didn't see it when it stared him in the face. After all, what did it matter if Hugh thought Frances a little less good than she was? She had so much to spare. Given the courage to tell Hugh that the letters was written to her and not to Frances, the man who had written it wasn't worth it. He wasn't worth a scene with Hugh. She was bored with him. He was so clumsy in his adoration—so horribly sure. She had never really liked him and he hadn't the gumption to see it. Frances must put up with something for her sake. The whole thing was funny if only Hugh would see it.

"Hugh!" she said.

"Valde!"

"It's awfully silly, isn't it?" she gave a little laugh.

"What is silly?"

"Everything—it's all really as innocent and as stupid as Laura's kilt!"

Left alone, Valde first of all laughed, then cried—not much of either; then came to the conclusion that the world was an idiotic place—that it would never get straight while men were such idiots and women such fools. If only they would laugh more! Shrieks of laughter would have put an end to this Barbara business.

Barbara would have cried at being made a fool of. But what would that have mattered?

She walked to the looking glass and looked at herself long and earnestly. Scenes like this were bad for the complexion—very. "You'll have to be good, soon," she said, apostrophizing herself.

On leaving Valde, Hugh went to find Frances. He found her in the hall, sitting gazing straight in front of her, with a book in her lap.

"Frances!" he said, "I've a confession to make."

"What are we all coming to?" Sit down, and if you must—confess! Your conscience, Hugh, is a hard master. Don't let it get the upper hand—assert yourself!"

"It concerns you!"

"Me!"

Hugh nodded, "You remember that letter?"

"Which? Forgive me; there are so many."

"The one written to you—the one I saw—the one I did not mean to see—the one you didn't mean me to see."

"How do you know?"

"It's not difficult to guess—but be serious! Just now in talking to Valde, I forgot my promise—I mentioned that letter."

"To Valde? What did she say?"

Frances looked at him. He withdrew his gaze under the calm scrutiny of hers. "What did she say?"

"She couldn't believe it."

Frances looked away. "She never believes anything bad of anyone," she said lightly.

"Is that always a virtue?"

"Did I say it was? But it must be since Valde is all that is charming and delightful. I love her dearly."

"Do you suppose I don't?"

"Sometimes!"

"Frances!"

"I am willing, at all events, to trust myself to her judgment."

"You forgive me?"

"I forgive you, most indiscreet of men," said Frances, gaily. "We must laugh more, Hugh. Valde says we are much too serious. I tell her we are too happy to laugh. Isn't it in novels the heroine laughs most when her heart is breaking? I can afford to be serious. I am quite happy."

"Quite?"

"Absolutely! I don't say there are not a few things I would have different—a little different."

"Things? People?"

"Animal, vegetable or mineral? I won't be cross-questioned."

"Just tell me what you would have different?"

"For one person—you!"

"Me?"

"You!"

"Seriously, Frances?"

"Less seriously, of course! You are too serious."

"And the thing?"

"That I would have different? Love."

"What a vast thing to begin upon!"

"It's not always vast—that is one of the things I would change. I would have it vaster—less circumscribed—nobler—more trusting—more generous—not bound by convention and prejudice."

"You mean you would allow a woman, a married woman, greater freedom in her intercourse with other men? You must not expect the impossible of some men."

"I was not thinking of men only. I was thinking just as much——"

"No woman who really loves her husband——"

"I cannot imagine for a moment doubting the man I loved."

"There are very few women like you."

"What nonsense—that sounds as if I took that as a compliment—there are hundreds of women like me."

"No girl can imagine what she would do, when she really loves a man, if he betrayed her trust——"

"She would, at least, have been spared the pain of anticipation."

"A fool's paradise?"

"Rather a fool in Paradise than a wise woman outside the gates. Suspicion warps the finest character; it dogs the footsteps of anyone who allows it near them."

"But to believe in the existence of evil sometimes disarms it."

"It more often creates it. I don't mean that I don't believe in the existence of evil—it exists, I know—but—I'm no good at arguing, I only know that if I loved anyone as I feel I could love someone, there would be no room for misery and doubt—love should crowd them out."

"Surely there's such a thing as a righteous anger?"

"Anger ! Of course there is. There's a splendid blazing, furiously-raging anger, an anger that is altogether righteous ; but I'm not sure that it shouldn't, as a rule, be directed against oneself, instead of against others ! How tiresome you are, Hugh ! We shall be late for dinner."

CHAPTER XI

" WOULD Frewlin go to Mrs. Raleigh in the boudoir, please ? "

Such was the message delivered to Fräulein, on the Sunday morning following the night of Barbara's entertainment.

Something snapped somewhere inside Fräulein. She put her hand to the place where she felt her heart thumping. To steady it she stood still and took a deep breath. She had been told there was nothing like it. There was probably nothing on earth that would have stilled that thumping at that moment.

Fräulein had said she would come at once. The question was, could she ?

The deep breath failing her, she uttered a prayer. A more earnest prayer was never sent from earth to heaven. There were no words to it—a thought only, and that thought was that she might never be separated from Barbara.

Mrs. Raleigh was waiting for her in the boudoir. A beautiful woman—so happy, so prosperous—waiting for a poor little fräulein, whose heart was beating to suffocation.

" Madame ! " said Fräulein. That much she managed to say. She had to say it ; else would the lovely head never itself up have lifted ! The beautiful head was bent over the writing table. Its beautiful owner was making pot hooks—if only Fräulein could have known it. Marking time, that was all. What

in the world was she to say to Fräulein ? Tiresome woman !

"Is that you, dear Fräulein ?" said the gay voice, presently. "Do come in ! Let me see—twenty-five and fifteen—thirty—no."

Meanwhile, the heart was beating faster and faster. The eyes through their tears took in every detail of the happy woman's dress—the happy mother of distracting Barbara. She wore white ; at her waist pink malmaison carnations, round her neck pearls.

If Fräulein were in her place, it would be her child's arms that she would want round her neck ; but those Mrs. Raleigh never wanted. She must have pearls. Pearls so beautiful, so milky white, but not whiter than the neck they encircled. The hair, wunderschön, thought Fräulein—so much beauty and no heart !

"Dear Fräulein, how nice of you to wait ! Do sit down and we will have a comfy little talk. Here, this chair !"

She pushed a chair forward, taking one herself back to the light. Fräulein's faced the light.

"How pale her eyes are !" thought Valde.

To Fräulein she said, "Barbara is getting quite grown up, isn't she ?"

"Certainly, she is growing," said Fräulein, unclasping her hands and clasping them again.

Valde wondered if she was praying ; if so, it was horribly unfair.

To Fräulein she said, "You have been so wonderful with her ! For children of that age you are really excellent. Boys would interest you, wouldn't they ? I can't have a boy to please my husband, so I certainly can't have one to interest you. You would hardly expect that, would you ?"

The hands were clasped tighter. The blue eyes were looking down. The pinched mouth, the pale face, told Valde nothing.

"No, seriously," she said, laughing. "We think—that a change would be best for us all. You see last night was too much—I naturally expect someone to see that Barbara wears clothes—civilization demands that, doesn't it? Our homes are not music halls yet—not quite—very nearly. So it's all quite pleasantly arranged, isn't it? We shall be delighted to do anything we can for you—but I should say—boys! You see, Fräulein dear, it doesn't matter if boys do go about without clothes, for some reason or other—I don't know why! I can't help seeing the funny side of things, but Mr. Raleigh is very, very angry! I dreaded this meeting—I can't tell you how horrid I felt." Valde held out her hand. Mechanically Fräulein put out hers. Valde took it, and told Laura later that it was like an uncooked crumpet, stone cold.

But she felt uncomfortable when Fräulein said nothing and walked out of the room. "The nape of her neck looked so uncultured," said Valde later also to Laura Listowen.

Then Valde sent for Barbara. The scene was a short and stormy one. "She's packing now!" panted the child.

"Just as well, darling. How lovely you look, angry! I should cultivate it if I were you! What's the use of prolonging the agony? Do go, my dear child! You and your absurd Fräulein are wearing me out!"

Barbara flew to her father. She found him in the library, looking out of the window, relentlessly, stolidly. She felt the hopelessness of it all. Something must be done. Upstairs, Fräulein was squeezing out

her sponge, while the schoolroom maid was weeping bitterly.

"Daddy," she began, nervously, "if you send her away I shall——"

The figure at the window made no sign of having heard her voice even. She began again. "Daddy, you must listen! It was she who taught me to pray—really pray; it wasn't interference, because Mother really hadn't time. None of the girls I know really pray. Without her, I should never—have known anything about religion—really. I should have gone on thinking it was just a Sunday thing—just to gabble through—and be glad it was over—truthfully! It was Fräulein who taught me to be kind; that it was right to be kind—to people not so happy as myself. If I am not all that, it's not her fault—you must understand: it's just a little devil in me sometimes. I sang hymns to an old woman the other day—she cried—like anything!" That, she thought, must surely weigh heavily in the scale for Fräulein. "I dressed dolls for a bazaar last Christmas—for blind children, paid for them out of my own money—that was Fräulein. I love going to church: that's because I kneel beside her, and I know she is praying for me, for you, for Mummy."

Poor Barbara, she felt she was making no headway. What could she say that would make that stern face relax?

"If you send her away, I shall have no one to say I'm sorry to—no one to forgive me."

She felt that touched her father. For the first time he moved his hand inside his pocket: the jingle of keys reassured her.

She made a final and supreme effort.

"Daddy, she knew nothing about the dance last

night—I swear! You can't imagine how particular she is—how proper—she shrieks if she shows ever such a little bit of leg—shrieks—and when Thomas saw her in her dressing gown——”

Her father turned quickly round and caught her in his arms, “You blessed baby—you shall keep your Fräulein; but darling, come to me for forgiveness!”

“I sometimes think you are too good to forgive—d’you know how?”

He showed her. Then at his knee she knelt with her cheek against his hand, and talked to him. He had never been so near his child’s heart—never loved her so much. “But why doesn’t this wonderful Barbara sometimes peep out?” he asked.

“Because you would look surprised. She would be shy! No one but Fräulein would look as if she expected her. I tease and worry Fräulein; but she knows there is another Barbara deep down—else would she long ago home have gone! So! You see, darling, it’s like this!”

Barbara ran a finger along the crease down her father’s trousers, which tickled him frightfully; but he bore it for the confidence that was to come. “While I am young I am going to enjoy myself. Directly I come out I shall be a new Barbara—a slim, graceful, humbugging, untruthful Barbara—politely untruthful. I shall pretend to enjoy things when I don’t, and shall enjoy doing things and pretend I don’t do them. I shall use the expressions that make you shudder and Mummy laugh. I shall be smart! I shall pity women with double chins and bad legs. But I shall be kind to them. I shan’t ask them why they don’t wear tartan stockings, like Mrs. Listowen does! I shall be a hateful Barbara! Now tell me the Barbara you would like me to be!” He told her. He hadn’t

got far, when she laid a hand on his, "Steady, darling, you're forgetting yourself!" Then she said, seriously, "Darling, do you really want all that? And who would this wonderful Barbara find to play with? A little wickedness please, darling, is good for the best woman!"

Into Fräulein's bedroom stole Barbara, flushed, happy and triumphant. "Fräulein," she said, "Fräulein!"

"My child," came an upside-down voice somewhere from the inside of a dress-basket, "I am here!"

"Is there a place you would rather be?" whispered Barbara, kneeling beside her. "I don't mean the dress-basket—get up—now! Is there a place you'd rather be?"

Fräulein stroked the girl's hair, "Barbarous one, do not make fun just now, my child!"

"It's not fun. Is there a place? Look at me!" She looked. It was enough.

CHAPTER XII

THE house-party which Hugh Raleigh chose to describe in terms so unflattering began to break up of its own accord, or rather at the instigation of the post-office.

A telegram recalled Sir Everard. He confided to someone that it was a genuine one. The guests at Lochewen seldom resorted to those that weren't. This particular one was in cipher, therefore what it conveyed was intelligible to him only. For which reason—seeing there was no sense in it—the old woman at the post-office had hesitated to send it up to the Lodge. But having got into trouble over a thing of the sort before, she had to be careful.

Still it rankled! If a body had brains, it was for some good purpose they were given, and the free use of them should be allowed. So she argued. It was making a fool of a body to expect her to believe there was sense in words like that. Of course, if it had to do with the Government, that explained it. No sense was expected from some quarters. She didn't suppose they understood the telegram themselves!

The telegram that recalled Mrs. Egerton was another thing altogether. Any woman could understand that. It didn't need personal experience either to sympathise with the mother—poor thing. It interested the old woman enormously. There was sense in it. It was very long. People often wondered how Lady Blatherwake spent her money. One old woman in a post-office could have told them.

Violet read it with growing perplexity. It ran as follows: "Come at once the drains want looking to Parkin complains of sore throat and others gardener's wife has triplets Dick promised to be godfather before he knew of the expedition you must take his place christening urgent eldest decidedly delicate what can they expect one of them bound to be bounty to be arranged for don't delay think of suitable names **BLATHERWAKE**."

"What could she mean? Was she mad?" everyone asked, except Frances Bailey and Lang. She knew, and he guessed old Lady Wideawake knew what she was about.

Violet was quite certain Dick could never have promised to be godfather to triplets. He hardly knew of the existence of such things. The gardener's wife had presumed on his kindness.

Lang guessed the old lady had begun to take an interest in him. It behoved him to walk warily.

Several of the Lochewen party travelled south together.

Lang had no chance, and if the truth be told, little inclination, to talk to Violet Egerton alone.

If he was to be hauled over the coals by old ladies of Lady Blatherwake's type, the pursuit of the beauty might become tiresome. Such was his mood as he swung south through a night during which he slept but moderately well.

He was loth to relax his hold of Violet Egerton. It would be something to make a beauty like that. Men had died content, having done less. But he lacked, at the moment, the incentive. If someone else would get over the drudgery.

At the station he just saw her the next morning. It bored him not a little that he should feel it his

duty, in common politeness, to offer the services of his valet. He was relieved but perplexed, when she refused them. It was impossible that a woman he knew should find her own luggage. It was as incredible as a seal knowing its young among hundreds of other seals. Why did women travel without maids? He had heard of such a thing, but had rarely met with it. No woman should look at a man who hasn't shaved. But it was one of Violet Egerton's characteristics that she looked at everyone she spoke to, unless they happened to look at her in a particular way, then she invariably looked down.

It had amused him up till then to look at her in such a way as to compel her to look down. But at six o'clock in the morning, the length of her eye-lashes did not amuse him.

"Aunt Georgina has sent Parkin to meet me," she said.

"Oh," said Lang, with a sigh of relief. He remembered Parkin, at whose hands he had received benefits. To be met by Parkin gave her a social cachet, and almost removed the stigma of no maid. He said good-bye to Violet tenderly, noticing with appreciation a distracting wave of hair that broke over the brim of her toque. He respected her for that. It wasn't every woman who could boast a shining wave at six o'clock in the morning.

Violet asked Parkin how his throat was. He cleared it, in order to ascertain its exact condition, and said it was decidedly better. She asked about the drains, but hadn't the courage to mention the triplets. "Everyone else all right, Parkin?" She felt the question to be sufficiently all embracing. "The eldest one—so to speak, Ma'am, died. It was ailing from the first. There are two——"

"Two?" said Violet, "that seems——"

"To a man with no family, Ma'am, it seems a superfluity."

Parkin coughed discreetly. The subject of triplets is as difficult to a bachelor as it is to a newly-married woman. The danger to the one should not be so great as to the other; but to each there is the apprehension of what the future may hold. It becomes everyone to approach the subject with delicacy; with neither laughter nor undue boasting.

"Where is her ladyship?" asked Violet. Parkin said her ladyship had left Fairhome for Blatherwake, the day before, and was expecting Mrs. Egerton by the eleven o'clock train.

Violet was about to say she would go by that train, when Laura Listowen came up and asked her to go to the Berkeley to breakfast with her. Violet thought she might as well; she had several things to buy. The last few weeks had revealed a strange dearth of the necessities of life among her belongings. She turned to Parkin and told him to wire to Lady Blatherwake and say she would come by the afternoon train. "I am going to breakfast at the Berkeley with Mrs. Listowen—but Parkin?" Violet stepped aside and said, "Her ladyship said particularly about the christening. I thought I was to come for that; but if I go to Blatherwake——"

"The christening took place privately, Ma'am, in a hurry, so to speak. Thomas bicycled for the clergyman—springing a muscle in so doing—and——"

"I see. Well, tell her ladyship I have things to do in town." She spoke hurriedly. She felt herself growing amazingly like a woman of fashion. It is quite possible Parkin admired profoundly anyone who could afford to disregard the orders of her ladyship.

"I'll take this and that," said Mrs. Egerton, indicating a hat box and a dressing-case. With a gesture, Parkin begged she would indicate nothing. He knew exactly what she wanted.

Mrs. Listowen and Violet drove to the Berkeley. Parkin went to the nearest telephone. If he could manage it, he, too, was going to spend a day in town.

"This is too ducky of you," said Laura Listowen.

Violet froze: she hated the term of endearment. She began to wonder why she had agreed to breakfast with a woman she didn't really like.

Arrived at the Berkeley, Laura and Violet went to tidy up.

There wasn't much Violet could do. She had a bath; did her hair and put on a clean white embroidered muslin blouse, which she had put at the top of her dressing-case. She appraised her own forethought, and wondered if Mrs. Listowen had been as wise.

There was her blue serge she had travelled in. She hated that, of course. Who doesn't hate the clothes they travel in?

She went into the hall and sat down. She was destined to sit there for some time. She was beginning to wonder if she was to spend the rest of her natural existence there, when in came Laura. The bottom of Violet's world fell out. At that moment, she plumbed the depth of misery.

Laura was changed from head to toe. Violet could have forgiven much; but not the pink mal-maisons tucked into Laura's bodice, and her hat! It was the kind of hat that no woman can wear without doing other women an injury.

"I laid my little head down for a couple of hours," said Laura; "it's much the best thing to do. My

maid is a treasure, she always has everything I want in a small box; now I can do anything, or go anywhere!"

Of that Violet was acutely conscious. Laura put down on the table, in a heap, a long gold chain, set with jewels, on to which hung a gold purse, a gold cigarette-case and a gold match-box.

"London is rather peaceful, isn't it? What will you have for brecky? I love your hat! I had one like it—ages ago! I wore it night and day, until my maid took it away in desperation. She wears it now—by night, I expect. Oh, dear, aren't Hugh and Valde quaint?"

Violet said she thought them delightful.

"Of course, my dear! Did you ever know quaint people who weren't? They are the only people who count. That's a lovely girl."

Violet turned in her chair.

"Not here, silly! I mean Barbara. What a figure she is going to have. They made an unnecessary fuss, didn't they? Hugh makes——"

Violet, not wishing to pursue the subject, said she was very sorry for them.

"Of course! It's terrible with you! You are always making me feel I have said the wrong thing!"

To herself she was saying Violet was too fearfully dull and prosy. "I like Frances Bailey," she said.

"So do I," said Violet, delighted to get on to a subject on which she could talk; "I love her."

"Lots of people do! Even our immaculate host doesn't find her unattractive. Now we can say that! I think she's a young woman who knows a thing or two!"

"She's very clever," said Violet.

"Ve-ry clever! That's what I mean. You see

more than you will say. Everard says you will surprise us all some day."

"Me?"

"Yes, 'me'—you. He says you're not too clever, with a horrible power of fascination. I wish I were you, you little puritan! You think me horribly bad form, don't you? I'm not so bad as I look. You see if you have my hair and mouth, it's no use pretending you haven't! I'm what I am because it's expected of me! Don't look so surprised and pained. How I should love you if I were a man! I love you for never saying anything against anyone! It makes me feel safe and comfy! It's another of your charms in the eyes of our friend. He, too, might find safety in your silence. He said you were the most charitable, good woman he had ever met! And he knows! He had hundreds of sisters, older than himself, who guarded his morals and opened his letters. He kissed them all—the sisters I mean—night and morning! I wonder it didn't become a habit! Perhaps it did! Marmalade? I'm so sorry! How we gossip! Now we must shop—where?"

Violet was bitterly regretting that she had ever said anything about shopping. But she wanted one or two things. A cushion in a leather bag, for one thing. No woman travelled without one.

"I adore shopping," said Laura, putting on her gloves.

"It's awfully dull—a cushion," said Violet.

"That, my dear, of course, is easy enough. It will take exactly two minutes. Is hubby rich? I'm longing to know?"

"Rich?" said Violet, flushing. "Oh, no, he's got enough."

"Happy people! Enough. Most enviable of women."

"Well, you mightn't think so. We can't live at our place. We were there just for a time because we were just married and we thought it would be so nice——"

"While the cheques lasted?"

"Well, something like that; but there were the death duties and things. We shall live there some day, I hope."

"If the babies don't come too quickly—you musn't allow that. More happy homes have been ruined——"

Something caught at Violet's throat, and her eyes filled with tears.

"You're a baby yourself," said her companion, taking her hand. "Come, we'll shop—have you a cigarette? Have one of mine! Isn't this too ducky?" showing Violet the case. "Harry didn't mind a bit; the man who gave it to me is too dear! So's Harry. He's so understanding; when he sees I'm beginning to care too much, he steps in. That is what Valde wants. She wants someone to rescue her at the last moment. Harry and I understand one another perfectly. Lots of mothers have written to me, thanking me for being so good to their boys. Once it was rather serious. He was a dear! His mother came up from Bournemouth to inspect me. The boy had told her I was a dear old thing—a perfect mother to him. Imagine my feelings when she appeared! Mercifully, I had an upholsteress cutting out chintzes that day, and she made it perfectly all right. The mother went back to Bournemouth so happy."

"What was the upholsteress like?" said Violet.

"You want to know too much. Being kind to

boys is a missionary spirit common to women of my kind. I daresay women have been kind to your husband. I hear he's too sweet—a giant and as nice as he's big. Don't you miss him horribly? It was too soon to send him away, wasn't it? I should have been only too thankful if someone had sent Harry away three years after we were married. It was then I began to be bored. Three years is just about the time a husband begins to make horrible calculations on the counterfoils of his cheque book. I detest everything to do with money, except the money itself. Now let's go. Could you, like a dear, pay the bill until I change a five pound note? Thanks."

No doubt Violet was a goose. It never struck her that the best person in the world to change a five pound note is a waiter. There is no one who sorts with such admirable discretion the change.

"Now, let's go."

Mrs. Listowen gave the name of the shop. Violet knew it was the most expensive in London. However, a travelling cushion couldn't be much anywhere, or at all events the difference in price couldn't amount to much.

The buying of a cushion was simplicity itself, and took, as Laura had said, no time at all. "Now, let's go to Madame Ducie's! Don't you adore it?"

Violet was honest enough to say she had never been there, although it cost her a pang to do so.

"My dear, can your marriage have been legal?"

At Madame Ducie's began Violet's troubles. It was with grave apprehension she crossed the threshold of the door. With terror she viewed the man, in gold lace, who relieved her of her umbrella. He looked grieved that she should possess such a thing, probably despising women who took care of their clothes.

Face to face with Madame Ducie, Violet felt her courage slowly ebbing away. Madame made no secret of the fact that she had seldom seen anyone quite so lovely. She refused to believe it when Violet shook her head over a gown, saying it was beyond her. She couldn't order it; but she was weak enough to confess she would love to. Madame Ducie, herself a beautiful woman, put her head on one side and lost herself in ecstasy at the thought of Mrs. Egerton in the "Moonlight" frock.

"Moonlight," she said in an undertone to the young woman standing at her elbow.

A few moments later the stage at the end of the room was lighted up, and through the curtains, at the back of it, came a young girl nearly as beautiful as Violet—a slim, graceful, wide-eyed beauty. With measured footsteps she came the length of the room and stood in front of Violet and turned slowly round. At a look from Madame, she bowed and walked away with the same exquisite composure that, from the moment she had stepped through the curtains, had marked her movements.

"You can't refuse a frock like that—fancy to meet Dick in," said Laura. What was thirty guineas for a frock that would last ages, and when a rag, would look better than any other frock in the room? "Now, nightgowns! You simply must! You are just the kind of woman to look delicious in bed."

Violet meekly followed Laura; but she stopped and drew back on the threshold of a bedroom. It was all pink—a pink bed, with pink curtains, festooned with pink roses; in the bed a beautiful girl.

"No," said Violet, "I can't." She grew pink.

Laura laughed. "What's the matter? Surely there's nothing to shock you here? I call it too

darling for words. I wish I were ten years younger!" Laura was examining the nightgown, feeling the fineness of the material; marvelling at the work, and talking all the time to the beautiful mannequin, who lay there quite unembarrassed.

Violet stood outside the open door, and while she stood there it came upon her that there lay no particular sin in choosing a nightgown—so long as you could pay for it. There was no reason she shouldn't, if she chose, look at a pretty girl in bed. Laura was right; she was a goose. She must certainly have a nightgown like that, with ribbons just like those! She peeped round the door.

"That's right, don't be frightened," said Laura.

"What a delightful life," she said, as she and Violet walked away. "Imagine lying in that bed, and only having to look lovely all day."

"I expect she isn't there all day," said Violet.

"Well, any part of the day! You are dreadfully matter-of-fact. Tell me what particular sin is there in a pink bedroom?"

Violet supposed there was none. If she was miserable when she crossed the portals of that door, she was far more miserable when she went out. "I really don't want that tea-gown," she said.

"There lives no woman who can say that with truth."

"Well, I most certainly can't afford it."

"There lives no woman who need say that, unless she is plain and frumpy! Now, where?"

"A post office."

"My dear, there's simplicity about your shopping."

There was a post office within a few yards; the taxi drew up and Violet went in. She telegraphed to Madame Ducie: "Cancel order for tea-gown."

She signed her name with fierce determination. To say she regretted that tea-gown for months would be understating the case. It is doubtful if she were ever the same woman again, as Barbara would have said—did say of herself, in fact, when she lost a four-pound sea trout.

Violet fell to wondering what those girls felt like when, out of their gorgeous clothes into their old ones, they stole home. Did they feel the same women?

"Now," said Laura, "I want you to come and lunch with a cousin of mine—a sort of cousin—it's a lovely house; you'll adore it. Will you tell the man 213 Upper Brook Street—thanks."

It was on the tip of Violet's tongue to ask the cousin's name. But she felt shy. She had the miserable feeling of being a tool in the hands of her companion. She hoped the cousin wasn't a woman of the same kind.

"I wish," said Laura, suddenly, "that you would take Fisher; she's an A.1 maid and would make you the smartest woman in London. She can hardly keep her hands off your hair as it is. Besides, she is as discreet as a crab. She goes about with her eyes shut where you don't want her to see. I hate parting with her, but I've got my eye on a Frenchwoman. She's frightfully clever, and has difficulty in getting a character, so she's coming to me for a mere song. Do take Fisher!"

Violet protested she didn't want her. Laura told her that was absurd, she did want her; it was quite obvious. "Shall I tell her she can go to you?"

"Please don't!" said Violet, filled with terror at the thought of finding Fisher at her bedside, before she knew where she was. She struggled in her mind to find some reasonable excuse for not taking her.

To her intense relief she found what she thought a very good one. Later, in the still watches of the night, it comforted her when everything else about the day haunted her.

"I can't have her if she's wearing my hat."

"My dear, if the hat is in the least out of date she won't wear it."

The taxi drew up, and Violet paid the fare. She paid most things that morning. If her purse was less in evidence than Laura's, it was more useful.

The door of the house was thrown open by a footman. Another took Mrs. Egerton's cushion, another her umbrella.

"You should have got them to send that to meet you at the station," said Laura.

Violet was conscious of carrying a great deal, while Laura carried nothing.

There was no one in the beautiful room into which they were shown. Violet was quick to see that most of the things in the room were beautiful. Laura promptly informed her they were valuable.

"Isn't it too wonderful? Everything worthy of a custodian of its own! Here's the finest collection of patch boxes in the world. If you like to drown yourself in enamel, look at this!"

At that moment the door opened and a slim young man came in. He looked very young, very clean, very smart, very effeminate. He rushed affectionately at Laura Listowen, holding her hand while he thanked her for coming.

"Mrs. Egerton," said Laura.

His eyes brightened. He evidently thought it kinder still of Mrs. Egerton to come. With a gesture he signified his gratitude. Violet wondered if this could be the husband or the son of the cousin.

"Mary's here," he said, turning to Laura.

"How rippin'."

Violet felt reassured. She was glad Mary was coming. She didn't like this effeminate young man, nor the way he looked at her.

She felt that with a Mary she should feel at home. If she were the mother of this young man, she could be, at the worst, foolish to have spoilt him. If the wife, she had probably been the victim of worldly parents, and had married him for his money. But for all that she might be a nice woman, probably with a weak chin. There was a safety in Marys.

"Anything new, Dolly?" said Laura.

"Nothing that isn't really old. I was lucky in picking up this Sir Joshua. Had it in my eye for ages. Had an American against me, or was told so. Couldn't risk it. Have you ever been painted?" he said, wheeling round and fixing his gaze on Violet.

"No."

"Ah—well, there's no one who could do you justice—I mean now."

He stood looking at her, his head on one side, his eyes half closed.

"She must wait till she loses her expression of saintlike simplicity," said Laura; "there's nothing to catch hold of!"

The young man didn't answer, but stood gazing at Violet in a way she found very embarrassing. She wished Mary would come.

Luncheon was announced. Mary was late. The young man evidently had no intention of waiting for her. "You know the way, Laura?"

She led the way. Violet followed. Behind them came their host. As they went down the wide staircase he spoke to Violet and drew her attention to

the tapestry on the wall. "Here," he said; "me, not the tapestry."

Violet stopped, looked back and up. "Yes—just like that—that's how I should have you painted. Have you masses of hair? Yes! Thank God—one moment—is your husband rich? Don't be offended; you ought to be the most expensive of wives. Ah!"

Laura Listowen by this time was out of hearing. Had she heard she might have been vexed. One wonders why she took Violet to lunch with Dolly. Perhaps she had some debt to pay.

They sat down at a round table. It was laid for four. It stood in the window of the very large room. Everything was beautiful—the flowers, the silver, the cut glass. It wanted but Mary to complete it in the eyes of Violet.

The food was perfect, but the want of Mary robbed Violet of her appetite.

"Here you are, Mary!" said Dolly. "Mrs. Listowen you know! Mrs. Egerton."

Mary took a seat beside Mrs. Egerton. It was also beside Mrs. Listowen. Of that he seemed unconscious.

He was tall, very sunburnt, with the kindest eyes Violet had ever seen. He had a sad face, with eyes that smiled. Nevertheless, she wished profoundly that he hadn't been a man. It was probably the first time anyone had ever wished that.

It only wanted this to complete the miseries of this most miserable day. Here she was lunching with two unknown bachelors, in the midst of a magnificence which in itself was disquieting. In imagining the wickedness of the world she had never pictured anything so terrible as this.

"Mary" talked to her charmingly, in a low voice. She was quite conscious of the fact that Dolly was

only waiting his opportunity to break in. But Mary wouldn't give Dolly the chance.

In her embarrassment she hardly knew what Mary was talking about, until she found herself in the heart of Africa and her own heart thumping.

When it had ceased to thump or thumped less, she told him that she was interested in Africa. He asked her in what part? And she told him. Then, in course of time, he asked her if it were possible that she *could* be Dick's wife, and she said it was.

Then it appeared that he was probably going back to Africa, and he hoped he might chance upon Dick, and would tell him he had met her. He said how delighted Dick would be. And he said he must remember every detail. He pulled down his shirt-cuff and took out a pencil and gravely began writing, "You must help me out with the technical expressions. Are you wearing a blouse or a blouse? My friends tell me a blouse pronounced 'blewse' is something over eight guineas; pronounced blouse—but it's an ugly word, isn't it?"

He saw she was distressed, and put away his pencil. "It beats me," he said, laughing; "I shall tell him how you looked; that will do, I think."

He did not guess, naturally, that Violet was in terror that he would tell Dick that he had met her lunching with two very wicked bachelors. No wonder Sir Everard despaired of her.

She hated the way Laura was talking; still more did she dislike the subjects she chose for discussion. She hated being advertised as her friend. She longed to tell this man that her mother wore mushroom hats, and never dined out on Sundays. She felt he would appreciate it. She told him she was passing through London. She could not say so, but she

hoped he guessed that she didn't like Mrs. Listowen. Of course he did. He knew nothing else could be possible. He was wondering what in the world had induced Dick to go away, and he asked her when she expected him back.

She said she didn't know. She lowered her eyes to hide the tears in them; but she did not succeed in doing that. And her companion was glad to see the tears, which was strange, considering that a man hates, more than anything, to see a woman cry.

"Shall we have coffee in the library?" said Dolly. "I have lots of things to show Mrs. Egerton."

No, Mrs. Egerton did not smoke. "Not?" said Dolly, holding out his cigarette-case. "Why not begin now?"

"We've just discovered her," said Laura, lighting her cigarette, "at Lochewen. Her education is only just begun—Everard Lang—oh! I must tell you about Barbara Raleigh."

"No, please don't," said Violet; "please don't!"

"No, Laura!" said Dolly, "I won't have Mrs. Egerton made unhappy. Tell me later."

They had coffee. Laura smoked and laughed, and the men smoked and Dolly didn't laugh. He kept on waving away his smoke and gazing at Violet, quite absorbed in the contemplation of her beauty. He got up to look at her from another point of view, and remained absorbed, to Laura's evident displeasure.

The debt she owed must have weighed heavily on her not usually uneasy conscience.

"Now, Dolly," she said, "let's go upstairs!"

"Now?" he said, reluctantly.

"Yes, now. You will forgive us for a few moments, won't you, my dear," she said to Violet. "Mary will take care of you!"

She added something in French, which Violet didn't catch; but it decided her. It was all too wicked. The French made it quite impossible. Here was an opportunity to show herself a woman of the world. With dignity she rose and asked for a taxi. "I don't know your name!"

"Stuart is my name: hence the Mary! It's a joke that has stuck to me ever since I was a boy. But must you go?"

He said it so nicely that Violet wished she could stay.

Here was a real danger—vice in an attractive form. Many girls would have been blind to it.

"Yes, I must go. Will you tell Mrs. Listowen I have an appointment."

"I will."

The taxi was at the door. They walked into the hall and out on to the pavement. He held the door of the cab open. "Dolly's mother would have loved to see you," he said, "but the doctor's orders are, one at a time, and I was with her till luncheon. She is the dearest old saint in the world, and the last mother you would choose for Dolly. She has been more than a mother to me."

The door of the taxi was irrevocably open; there was nothing to do but get in. Violet got in.

He said, "Where to?" His eyes were smiling.

She thought, "Where to?"

Where could she go? She didn't know anyone in town at this time of year, and she had two hours to put in!

"Westminster Abbey," she said, in desperation.

"Westminster Abbey," said Captain Stuart, quite seriously, to the driver. How else could he have said it? There is nothing that calls for mirth in the mention of Westminster Abbey.

Violet was never to hear it again for years, without blushing. She could have cried with mortification. She had run away from two perfectly respectable young men, chaperoned—a floor only intervening—by a saintlike old lady. She had been too miserable to eat an excellent luncheon, and she was on her way to Westminster Abbey to spend two hours among cold monuments, of unassailed virtue. She was glad of her cushion.

Why was she not more of a woman of the world? Why should she get into such difficulties? She had two hours in which to think that out. At the end of the two hours she arrived at the station, but at no definite solution of the problem.

She was met by Parkin. He relieved her of the cushion with the gravest deference. His face plainly showed that he expected the cushion with "The Spectator" ostentatiously tucked into it; and if he too had not lunched at Upper Brook Street he might have suspected the existence of a more frivolous paper tucked in behind it.

But the hurried flight to the sanctuary for refuge had convinced him of the improbability of this. Such exemplary behaviour in one whose husband was thousands of miles away was very laudable.

But Parkin felt Sir Everard's task to be a hard one. He had once tried something of the same sort himself with a young woman from Devonshire, and he had come to the conclusion that you can't make a worldly woman out of a simple one, or anything socially successful of one devoted to the chamber of horrors at Madame Tussaud's.

Violet, seeking a shadow of excuse for her own simplicity, was inclined to blame the mushroom hats her mother had always worn. A child growing up

beneath their shade must of necessity be simple. If there was a world beyond, a child could hardly stretch out far enough to see it.

To Violet's surprise, Parkin carried in his arms a Pekinese spaniel.

"He's been to the Vet., Ma'am," he said.

"I will take him; I should love to."

So there she was, a woman of fashion, travelling with her cushion and her dog. She lightly kissed the Pekinese on the top of his head, and the Emperor within him forgave the liberty, although he felt it due to his Imperial dignity to resent it.

He preferred to be carried, however, by a young woman of fashion, than by Parkin. But he knew this one wasn't the real thing, because she looked to see if ~~his~~ hairs came off on her frock.

No really fashionable woman would do that.

"Not for the hairs of your chinny, chin, chin!"

CHAPTER XIII

"WHAT have you been doing all day?" said Lady Blatherwake to Violet, across the dinner table.

"I lunched with a cousin of Mrs. Listowen's."

"Where?"

"In Upper Brook Street."

"Didn't know she had any cousin so respectable. What was the name?"

Violet said she didn't know.

"You must know the name."

"Well, Dolly and Mary. Mary was a man, and his name was Stuart."

"Oh, Dolly Greenwell. He's the cleverest idiot I know; but he's no cousin of Laura Listowen's. He doesn't number that among his follies."

"Cleverest idiot?"

"Yes, the tips of his fingers ooze artistic cleverness, which his manner disguises. He has a perfect nose for anything old and good—is clever enough not to believe everything old that looks it, or everything old, good. He is adding to a very valuable collection his father left. He's not above making something out of other people's ignorance. He has turned many a bad picture into a valuable one, by allowing it to hang on his walls for a bit. There have been financial crises in Dolly's life. He is one of the few men I have ever met who looks at a woman from a purely artistic point of view. He's half a man, to my mind—if half."

Violet asked if it was from an artistic point of view he looked at Mrs. Listowen? She wondered if he admired her? And in wondering felt very worldly.

"He certainly does if he appears to. He never wastes time. There is probably something about the woman that appeals to him. To my mind, she looks as if she had been created by an impressionist. There's nothing finished about her. Everything is put in boldly for effect—colour and all."

"She is certainly startling. Is that what you mean?"

"I don't know what I mean. Startling? He doesn't ask more of a certain sort of woman. Is she as common as she was?"

"I thought her common," said Violet, "but I wasn't sure whether I understood her or not."

"My dear child, don't imagine your simplicity robs you of the power of knowing a gentlewoman when you meet one. Her mother wasn't a lady, and nothing will ever make Laura one. But still, she's a social success, for all that. There's always room in the world for women like Laura. She supplies a demand."

"She says and does things no lady could do or say," ventured Violet primly, proud of her perspicacity.

"My dear, there you're wrong. She says and does things no one but a lady can afford to do or say. There's a distinction, mind you! I've done and said everything I wanted to do and say all my life. What did Mary Stuart think of her? He can't understand there being a demand for such women. Did he smile sadly at her?"

"He did."

"And kindly at you?"

"Yes, very kindly."

"I thought so."

"For Dick's sake."

"Of course; you will find a great many men will smile at you for Dick's sake, and a great many at Dick for your sake. Laura still talks about the emancipation of the sex, does she?"

Violet nodded.

"Which in itself is an absurdity," continued the old lady. "How can women talk about the emancipation of the sex and at that same time wear straight-fronted stays? It's idiocy. You emancipate woman as a whole. It's no use letting her out in one direction and taking her in in the other. Now amuse me, Violet! Tell me about Valde and Hugh, and all their tangled stupidities. And Barbara, how does she shape?"

Violet told Lady Blatherwake a good deal about Barbara, but left out the very thing that would have told her how Barbara was shaping. The old lady learnt a good many things that night. If Violet had been asked what she told her, she would have said she had told her—she didn't smoke; that she liked Hugh and Valde; thought them rather silly in making troubles out of nothing. That she liked Frances Bailey. Wondered why she didn't marry. That she liked Scotland. And a few other things. What she really told the old lady was—that she wished she were like Valde; as much a woman of the world as Laura Listowen; as rich as the Raleighs. That she aspired some day to be smart enough to be admired by Everard Lang, and many other things.

Lady Blatherwake's heart warmed to the young man in Africa and hardened towards the older one in London.

She made a vow to be even with him. She talked to Violet of everything but drains and triplets. She seemed to have forgotten the telegram. It had served its purpose, so why bother about it?

"I should go home to your mother for a bit if I were you, my dear. It's the place for you," and she lightly touched the child's cheek with her fingers. "Do you use anything for your skin?"

Violet shook her head.

"Well, don't. To-morrow I'll take you to see a good woman—the best in the world. She doesn't use anything for her skin either. Is it because she's good, or is she good because she doesn't? Yes, in a few days you must go to your mother."

Then, holding a candle within a few inches of Violet's nose—they were standing outside her bedroom—she said, "Is Everard Lang getting fat?"

Violet said she hadn't noticed it; but the thought perturbed her. She didn't think she really liked him. She wondered, and as she wondered she knelt at the open window of her bedroom.

It was a lovely night, warm, still and quiet—desperately quiet! The gentle night breezes fanned her face. A cluster of white roses gleamed in the moonlight—how she loved them! She drew them towards her and kissed their fragrant beauty. She felt horribly lonely. She may have thought it pathetic that she should be reduced to kissing roses. Whether or not she felt that, she certainly grudged those two hours spent in Westminster Abbey. She wondered if they had laughed about it, those two men, if Dolly had told Mary?

He had not. He had made up quite a good story, and for a man of his reputation had shewn a wonderful knowledge of the shopping haunts of fashionable

women. In that he ran a risk. He shewed a more intimate knowledge of things fashionable than Laura Listowen knew Violet possessed. Laura was so pleased at the disappearance of Violet that she was not disposed to quarrel with the manner of her departure. Dolly was too enthusiastic over her beauty.

When alone, the two men sat silent for some time; then Dolly said, "What did you think of her?"

He lay back in his chair, crossed his legs, clasped a slim ankle and looked round at Mary. "It's serious this time, old man!" He jumped up and paced up and down the room excitedly.

"No need to tell me that," said Mary; "but are they ever anything else?"

"She's different—the purity of her expression. It's a face I could say my prayers to! The texture of her skin—her colouring, the lines of her figure. Did you notice her hands? Heavens, Mary, have you no sense of beauty?"

"I thought she was very pretty!"

"Pretty! She's the loveliest thing I've ever seen. Oh! the d——d conventions of this stagnant world! Why should such a creature be the property of one man? She should be presented to the nation!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE woman Lady Blatherwake chose, at that particular moment, to think the best in the world was Mrs. Grieve.

If Mrs. Grieve had depended on her goodness alone to interest the old lady she would have failed to do it, since it was well known that goodness without extenuating circumstances bored Georgina Blatherwake to death. What really interested her was to see how Mrs. Grieve managed to live with a man she held to be quite impossible. The situation aroused her interest and at the same time her pity. Where Lady Blatherwake pitied she invariably loved; as invariably did she hate where she despised.

She ordered the limousine for four o'clock. At half-past four she knew she would find the object of her affectionate interest, sitting behind the tea-pot, ministering with tact and patience to the object of her detestation.

So at four o'clock Lady Blatherwake and Violet started.

"I never talk in the motor," said the old lady. "I had that tiresome Mrs. Wills here the other day. I took her for a drive, and she never stopped talking the whole time, and all about that tiresome family of hers. Their cleverness is superhuman. She said nothing about their looks! They were the plainest children I ever saw. That they couldn't help. With their parents they couldn't be anything else. There is nothing they can't do, nothing they can't write! One has written a book on astronomy that

no astronomer can understand"—the old lady chuckled—"because it's so clever, my dear!" she said, nudging her niece. Violet hated being nudged. She knew enough about mothers to see the point without that emphasis.

"As sportsmen, my dear, there was nothing that could be desired. They had shot impossible beasts at incredible distances with inadequate weapons. They were so clever, as boys, that their respective schoolmasters had publicly thanked the parents for entrusting to them the training of such gigantic brains. The one who was less clever than the others, had been publicly thanked for his moral influence with the other boys, while out walking."

"Why out walking?" asked Violet.

"I don't know; don't ask me. I'm only telling you what was told me—or as nearly as I can remember. She most pointedly told me that children were sent as a direct blessing, from above, to those who deserved them. I asked her what about the children who shouldn't be here? And she said good women didn't think about them. They were the evidences of men's thoughtlessness. That was a new way of putting it. You haven't been worried yet about children? Well, wait. A woman once asked me, in Church, if I was sorry I hadn't any children. I was singing the 'Te Deum' at the moment. Such a moment to choose! I twiddled the answer, suiting the words to the music."

Then Lady Blatherwake passed on to children in general, people in general, the Grieves in particular. Violet listened.

A few days later, Lady Blatherwake, writing to a friend, said she had Violet Egerton staying with her. "A dream of beauty but nothing to say. She's poor company. It doesn't matter now; but when she loses her looks, then!"

When the motor drew up at the Grieves' house, Violet said what a beautiful house it was.

"It baited the trap," said her aunt.

It did not require any great prescience on the part of Violet to guess that the trap, in the case of Mrs. Grieve, had been the marriage and the bait the house. She wondered what the man was like who had set the trap, and what kind of a prey it was that had walked into the trap. She was interested.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Grieve sat behind the tea-pot, ministering to the wants of her sisters-in-law, Mrs. Handley and Miss Grieve. Not that her ministrations were needed. Mrs. Handley seized the tea-pot whenever she wanted it; so did Miss Grieve.

"You do have visitors sometimes, I suppose, Elsie?" said Anne Grieve. "It would be bad for Henry otherwise. He's so fond of his fellow-creatures."

"Yes, certainly," said Elsie, "especially since the days of motors. Almost more than one wants."

"Than Henry wants?" said Mrs. Handley, cutting a cake.

"Henry is very often out. Then it is left to me to entertain them."

"That's where a daughter would have come in," said Anne.

"After she had come out," said Elsie, excusing the poorness of the joke with a laugh. "She would still be in the school-room."

"Girls are so much in evidence nowadays," said Anne. "I suppose you would have allowed her to come down to tea, and to go to garden-parties and flower shows. I don't believe myself in keeping girls back too much; it only makes them awkward and shy when they *do* come out. I can't

see why they shouldn't dine downstairs, say on Sundays ! Of course, it's nothing to do with me. I have no wish to interfere. I only think it would be natural for a child of Henry's, if he had had one, to be social. And it is so important that girls should know the right sort of people. The county *do* come ! ”

“Some of them come. But we must remember that we cannot take the place of people who have been here since the Doomsday book was written and the county not resent it.”

“Henry could take the place of anyone, and I should have thought ten years—however, what does it matter ? Who comes most often ? ”

“Most often ! ” mused Mrs. Grieve.

“Not counting Captain Stuart,” said Anne.

“He's not a person to be left out of our calculations.”

“I leave that calculation to Henry,” said Mrs. Handley.

The two sisters exchanged looks.

“After Captain Stuart, I should say Lady Blatherwake.”

“She's tiresome, isn't she ? ”

“I am very fond of her.”

“She says things about people, doesn't she ? ”

“Yes, she says things about people, but to their faces, which makes it all right ; don't you think so ? ”

“Certainly not, and in any case she is one of those abominable persons who think they are privileged to say what they like. She is old, ugly and rich.”

“And she has the kindest heart in the world,” said Mrs. Grieve.

The two sisters-in-law sniffed. Elsie had a kind heart, but for all that she was tiresome.

“It is a pity,” said Anne Grieve, “that with all that money she has no children.”

There was a silence.

"Don't you think so, Elsie!" said Mrs. Handley, fingering the chain round her neck from which hung the eight lockets containing the portraits of her husband and seven children.

"Of course, Lady Blatherwake always says so. On two occasions she apologised publicly—on the occasion of her silver wedding, and on Lord Blatherwake's death. Also, I believe, when he succeeded to the title. But she was very young then, and she asked the tenants to have patience."

"That's frightfully vulgar, Elsie. I can't bear the story," said Anne Grieve. "I can't understand how you can repeat it."

Elsie laughed. "You won't let me! Personally, I think it rather quaint and rather pathetic—the young wife called upon to make a speech."

"Lady Blatherwake—Mrs. Egerton," announced the butler.

Across the hall sailed Lady Blatherwake, followed by Violet.

"Dear Lady Blatherwake, how nice of you to come!" said Elsie.

"It's never nice of me to do a thing I want to do. I've brought my niece, Mrs. Egerton."

"Mrs.?" said Elsie; "did you say, Mrs.?"

"Yes, foolish child; isn't she?"

"Forgive me," said Elsie Grieve, smiling at Violet, "It took me by surprise."

She held the girl's hand and drew her to the table.

"When I saw you, I was glad there was a sugar cake."

"I am still glad," said Violet.

"Your husband isn't here?"

"No, he's away."

"In Africa," said Lady Blatherwake.

A happy wife could have expressed her sympathy in a look. Violet imagined that Mrs. Grieve looked rather as if she thought Africa an excellent place for husbands.

"Is your tea as you like it?" Elsie asked Lady Blatherwake.

"No tea could ever be that," said the old lady. "I drink it when I go out because it saves the bother of explanations. If I say I don't like tea, there is invariably a charming mother who has a son planting tea somewhere. I must keep up my reputation for never hurting people's feelings unnecessarily. But I never like tea."

"Then you do sometimes do things you don't like," said Anne Grieve.

Lady Blatherwake turned, looked at her, then holding up her lorgnette, gazed at her steadily for a second or two. It annihilated Anne. Like Sir Everard, she found the scrutiny no light thing. Anne wondered how Elsie could like the odious creature, and she wished Maud would show her all the lockets. No doubt Maud would. She needed only time; courage she never lacked.

Henry Grieve came in.

"Ah, Lady Blatherwake!" he said, "how are you, how are you?"

"Quite well, quite well; why this hurry?"

"Just in from shooting; capital day—tea, Elsie? Don't get fresh. For someone else? Well, why won't this do? What's good enough for me, eh? Well, see that the water boils. It never does in this house, for some unknown reason! Capital day! Frenshaw was shooting—you know Maud, can't hit a haystack. Jealous shot! Didn't half like me shooting so well. Cake? Yes, cake—nothing hot!"

All this while he bustled around, helping himself to cake.

"Just back from Norway, Lady Blatherwake. You must see my big fish; it's a beauty!"

"Trout?"

"Trout! My dear lady, a fish in Norway means salmon."

"Did you stuff it?"

"No—n-o—cut it out in wood. I drew round the fish, see, and cut it out afterwards."

"How did you hold the pencil?"

"Hold it? Like any other pencil, I suppose."

"Outwards, inwards, or upright? Oh, it makes a great difference to the size of the fish."

"You're getting at me, Lady Blatherwake."

"Not in the least. I am trying to discover what sort of a man you are!"

"By the way, Elsie," said Anne, "has Captain Stuart been home long on leave?"

"Six months," said Elsie. "Shall we go into the garden?" turning to Lady Blatherwake.

"I haven't done my tea, Elsie," said her husband, peevishly. "After being out all day—But go, don't mind me!"

"Maud or Anne will give you your tea, I am sure. I want Lady Blatherwake to see the garden. You can follow."

"It takes time to see the garden," grunted Henry. "I don't keep twenty gardeners for nothing."

"Such gardeners, Henry," said Anne.

"No bad gardeners for me. Why didn't she leave the young woman for me to take round?"

"I think Elsie is a little upset," said Mrs. Handley.

"Upset? What at? What in the world has she

got to be upset about ! I paid for her pearls yesterday. I might be upset ! ”

“ A telegram came. She didn’t say what it was. Did she, Anne ? ”

“ No, she didn’t. She put it—where, Maud ? ”

“ Just there, I think,” said Mrs. Handley, getting up and walking to the writing table. Here it is ! ”

“ Under the blotter ! ” said Anne.

“ No, on the top—here, Henry.”

He opened it.

“ Bad news, dear ? ” said his sister.

“ Same old thing,” said Henry.

The sisters leant back in their respective chairs, and sighed over the blindness of their brother.

Mrs. Handley opened the smallest of her lockets and looked at her last born—“ the afterthought,” as she liked to call him when she felt very daring. She had heard the expression used by a very smart woman and had treasured it. It was not often Mrs. Handley felt daring ; but there were days on which she did, and it was on those rare occasions she craved a legitimate outlet for the smart things she had heard others say. She imagined that, had she been born in the set that is called smart, she would have found that outlet. The expressions she longed to use would, in that set, have caused neither herself nor anyone else surprise.

At other times she felt no temptation. Hers was a natural, and she thought it might almost be called a maidenly modesty. She had never known a dissipation greater than a week-end at Brighton. A week-end in an hotel always made her feel rather reckless. The uncertainty as to who might have slept in the bed before her gave her a feeling of bewildering embarrassment. She felt it her duty not

to speak of these things to Anne, though to do so would be a relief. Anne might have taken the place of the smart set.

Anne thought "the mother look" a little overdone, seeing how plain a child was "the afterthought."

"Does Captain Stuart want to come down?" she said to Henry.

"He's coming! There's no 'by your leave.' He'll be going back to Africa soon, I believe."

"When did dear Elsie say she wanted to go to Madeira with Mrs. —?"

It was wasted: Henry had gone in pursuit of beauty. He would have said he didn't often get the chance—forgetting the beauty of his own wife. But to that he had long grown accustomed. She was too pale; her eyes were too dark, large and sad.

They held within their depths a reproach which was an insult to her husband. Why couldn't she look jolly?

After he had left the room the elder of his two sisters got up and peered into his tea-cup. He had left his tea untasted and his cake crumbled.

"What has he done with the telegram?" said Anne.

"It's here."

"Put it back where you found it, under the blotter."

"Are you sure it was under?"

Meanwhile Henry joined the others in the garden. He manœvered to get Violet away from the other women, and having done so, gazed at her with undisguised admiration. "By Jove," he said, "why haven't I seen you before? Staying with your aunt? Not your's, your husband's, I suppose? No! I always said she was a sly old thing. How does she

spend her money! Where have you been! In Scotland! What part!"

She told him—Lochewen.

"With the Raleighs!"

Violet, detesting him, said. "Yes."

"How was Valde? Was she behaving nicely?"

As soon as possible Violet slipped away and joined Mrs. Grieve, leaving Mr. Grieve with Lady Blatherwake.

Violet and Elsie walked along without speaking. In those moments of silence a friendship sprang up between the two women, born on the part of Violet of a deep sympathy. A mutual dislike is sometimes a firmer bond than a mutual love. "Have you been married long?" she said, wondering how long it would be possible to bear this martyrdom.

"I! It was the very thing I was going to ask you. I've been married ten years."

"I have been married twelve weeks."

Elsie would like to have asked why he had gone away, instead of which she said she would like so much to see him.

"I should like him to see you," said Violet impulsively.

"To see me?"

She nodded, "Yes, to see you." Then she added in a burst of confidence: "I met someone the other day who knows Dick."

"It was a comfort to you?"

"In a way. He's going to see him again soon."

"The someone is going out to Africa?"

"Yes—a Captain Stuart."

Elsie Grieve stopped. She drew the pin slowly out of her hat, put it back again and said, "I know him; he's a great friend of ours."

In lowering her head to pull out the hat-pin, the

brim of her hat hid her face. It had been her intention to hide her face. But the faint flush that came to her cheeks did not escape Violet.

"When did you meet him?" asked Elsie, giving her head a little toss, as much as to say the hat was now comfortable.

"A few days ago at the Greenways, in Upper Brook Street."

"My aunt's! Did you see her? She's such a darling. She has been more than a mother to me; or did you only see the absurd Dolly?"

"I saw Dolly."

"Did he see you and remain sane?"

Violet laughed. "Do you always live here?" she asked.

"Nearly always. My husband doesn't care to go away much. He has a great many interests here, and the property requires looking after. He's quite right; why should one want to go away?"

Violet's heart went out with a sudden rush to Dick.

She felt deeply sorry for the woman at her side, who was quite young really, but whose face wore a look of utter weariness and disappointment.

"How much does Laura Listowen owe you?" said Lady Blatherwake to Violet as they drove home together.

"How d'you know she owes me anything?"

"You and she went out together, didn't you?"

Violet laughed. Laura's character was well-known evidently.

"I'll get it out of her," said Lady Blatherwake.

"How shall you put it? Won't it be difficult?"

"Put it? As I have put everything all my life when I have wanted it."

"It must be wonderful to have tact like that."

Her aunt laughed. This is the form her tact took when, later, she wrote to Laura :

"DEAR LAURA,

"Please send the money you owe my niece.

"Yours,

"GEORGINA BLATHERWAKE."

It was simple enough. By return of post came the money.

Violet Egerton envied her aunt that power of getting what she wanted.

"It's power every woman can have if she likes."

The old lady was wrong there. It is not given to every woman to be allowed to say exactly what she likes. To one with a face and voice like Violet's it would be impossible ; which was in some ways a pity. A manner like Lady Blatherwake's carries one unscathed through life and it doesn't hurt other people nearly so much as they imagine.

"It a good deal to do with age," said Lady Blatherwake. "The woman of forty-five who will own to it has a glorious time. Other women are kind to her, and men are ready enough to remember what she was. I respect a woman of forty-five with a clearly defined jawbone and a definite chin. But they are rare. All of a sudden something happens to one's chin. In time it joins issue with one's neck. The compensations are that one can eat muffins with impunity, if that particular form of vice appeals to one. Young men will still come and see one, if one feeds them well, and if instead of talking about oneself one talks about them. After all what's the difference ? I daresay you are beginning to find men a little tiresome, eh ?"

Violet laughed ; she didn't commit herself.

"Look at Valde's future! There's misery in store for that woman. She owns that she's wretched if she attracts less notice than usual. The day she walks up Bond Street without a man looking at her, she dies to all intents and purposes. It's better to have always been plain, my dear." So said Lady Blatherwake as she sat smoking her cigarette after dinner.

"You don't smoke?" she said. "Does Dick object?"

"Oh, no," said Violet; "Ferney does."

Ferney was the Charltons' butler.

"Tell me more about your absurd and ridiculous family."

But Violet wanted to talk about the Grieves. She wanted to know why she had married him. Half the world is always wondering that about the other half. Her tact took her skirting round the subject.

"Why talk about herbaceous borders," said Lady Blatherwake, "when you want to know what I think of Elsie Grieve?"

"The borders were lovely."

"Of course they were; so's Elsie. As I said before, she's the best woman in the world. Of course, there's your mother; but I don't imagine she is struggling with a hopeless passion for a man other than your father!"

Violet laughed at the absurdity of the idea.

"In this case you can laugh; but there are cases that would astonish you. Smouldering in the hearts of the quietest little women, there are fires no one suspects. They take them marketing with them every morning——"

"The fires?"

"Yes, the fires. They burn; smoulder night and day. As those quiet women sit by the cradles of their children, the fires burn in their hearts for men

other than the fathers of} those babies. They are dream children they rock to sleep. Yes, it's wrong—wicked even; but for all that it's true, and Heaven knows there's excuse enough sometimes!"

Violet was shocked. Her aunt's morals were troubling her very much.

"I think," she said, "Mrs. Grieve is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

"She's far from that I should say. But it is natural you should think so. At your age, the romance of melancholy would appeal to you. It's not till one is over fifty that one thanks God for every happy face one sees."

"What is it in her face?"

"For one thing, self-sacrifice."

"Is he unkind?"

"What do you mean by 'unkind'? He doesn't beat her or pinch her or starve her. But he's cross! He's always cross. He's cross in the morning; crosser in the afternoon; crosserest in the evening. What he is at night—Elsie only knows! I give him credit for that."

"Why did she marry him?"

"For money. She thought he would help her people. He never has. He got the better of her there. Why should he? Why should he keep other men in idleness? She has to account for every penny. If she has anything over she must spend it on dress. She is laden with jewels. She groans under the heat of her furs in winter."

"Why doesn't she leave him?"

"Because she's got to pay, my dear. She keeps her part of the bargain—she pays."

"And Captain Stuart?"

"Ah, that's where her payment comes heavy. Women forget that. She's too good a woman for it to be anything but hopeless."

"Does he care?"

"That's what we want to know. I imagine that Frances Bailey would like to know! I believe he cares as much as any nice man must care when he sees a woman bullied. I don't suppose it is to him what it is to her. It never is! The most pathetic part of the whole thing is that Elsie has the example of a bad mother before her—or behind her I should say. The mother was what people call a bad woman. Personally I should as soon call a butterfly bad. She had as much moral sense as a butterfly. She lived for the pure joy of living—harum-scarum, reckless and generous. She gave everything she had to anyone. She paid to the uttermost farthing. She lost her beauty, her friends, her money. She lived to be disowned by those she had benefited. Do you remember what Sir Thomas More said of Jane Shore?"

"Have I ever met him?" said Violet.

"Don't be a goose! *The* Sir Thomas More—what he wrote, if you are so particular. 'At this time she beggeth of many at this day living, that at this day had begged if she had not been.' It could have been said with equal truth of Elsie's mother. Poor Elsie doesn't trust herself. She watches for the bad in her to spring up, not realizing, poor child, that the best in her is born of the worst in her mother."

When Violet went to bed that night she thought a great deal about Elsie Grieve and Captain Stuart. Among other thoughts—one knows how thoughts come unbidden to one's mind—one crept into hers for a minute, to be hurriedly dismissed. The elusive thought was, "Perhaps that was why he hadn't followed her to Westminster Abbey." She would have been horrified if she thought she had thought that.

CHAPTER XV

THE question was—would Violet be cold after her journey ?

The argument against it was that it wasn't cold. On the contrary, for the time of year it was warm.

"But travelling !" said Mrs. Charlton.

The Charltons had only the ordinary and practical ways of telling if the room was hot or cold. If it was hot Bramble, the spaniel, panted ; and if it was cold Peter, the boy, put his fingers down someone's neck—just to show.

Neither Bramble nor Peter was there.

"Light the fire," said Violet's father.

"She's never cold," said her mother.

But the father rather wanted it himself.

So they both lighted the fire, each feeling the other's method to be the wrong one, and each proving it to their own satisfaction. It was the only thing they fought about. They argued over everything. But there is a great difference between an argument and a fight. It takes one of a large family to appreciate the difference. To an only child the difference might seem without distinction.

No Charlton had ever run the risk of being an only child. Never, for a moment, had such a thing been apprehended by any of the relations on either side. The eldest child remained an only child just so long as was absolutely necessary. The relations thought the second arrival unnecessary. What to them was folly was a ship in sight to the doctor. He had for

years promised his wife that, when his ship came in sight, he would build her a conservatory. At the arrival of the second little Charlton he built it. In so doing he ruined an old house, but kept a promise made to his wife in the days when they had both been young, and had stood looking out to sea, hoping to sight the ship which had not yet set sail. She embarked on the waters of their life the day the Charlton family started on theirs.

About the second arrival Mrs. Charlton chose to disagree with her relations. It was absolutely essential to the moulding of her eldest boy's character that he should have a younger brother. While he was still in the cradle the need became apparent. He shewed a tendency to keep everything to himself, and refused to part even when "Ta" was said to him—"which shewed," as children say.

The second boy was an altogether delightful person, with just that amount of character that was necessary to the building up of his elder brother's.

In the course of years the elder brother called him a "cocksy little beast." But that cheekiness was what the elder brother's precocity needed to restrain it.

The relatives, even in those early days, began to be anxious. They took upon themselves to divide four thousand pounds a year into various portions, and agreed that a family of four would be ample, whereas, at this rate——

Mrs. Charlton used to wonder why they should worry themselves about a matter that was clearly no affair of theirs, forgetting that relatives are wont to assume a responsibility whether it is theirs or not.

They were justified in cautioning the Charltons if they chose. Mrs. Charlton was at perfect liberty to smile under the shade of her mushroom hat if she

liked. Both the relatives and Mrs. Charlton exercised their separate prerogatives.

Having two boys, Mrs. Charlton felt it her duty to have a daughter. Men without sisters lack something. They look back to their childhood and wonder what! When they meet other men's sisters they know. A regret of the kind expressed at the right time argues negligence on the part of the mother, if it is not remedied. It is no use boys waiting till they are grown up—and then grumbling.

Mrs. Charlton felt that her boys should not have cause to blame her for not giving them what was within her power to give. She realised that it might not be within her power alone; so she is said to have petitioned a Higher One to see that the next baby should be a girl. She was, and became, in course of christening, Violet.

She was too pretty a baby to remain the only girl.

The clergyman who baptized her felt it his duty to warn Mrs. Charlton of the responsibility that would be hers in bringing up such a child. It was astute of him to see the beauty that, to most men, would have lain hidden in her long clothes.

Men love little girls from three to six years old. There is hardly a man that would refuse one at a gift. But very few like them in the long clothes days of their extreme youth. It is as well that the world is not composed of men only. If it were, there would be no long clothes babies. Every baby, supposing there to be any at all, would start life in—it is difficult to say what men would choose; but good boots certainly, and well pulled-up stockings.

Another daughter then was inevitable. Although the clergyman didn't exact a promise, he must have

been hurt when he was called upon to christen the next—a boy.

A lapse of good manners, when it comes in the guise of a very attractive boy, is likely to be forgiven by women of Mrs. Charlton's type. She forgave twice.

After that a baby girl appeared, apologising for her delay. She was Iris. Her beauty made her worth waiting for.

Meanwhile the relatives were getting desperately anxious. They were allowed a voice in the matter. Mrs. Charlton had an acute sense of justice and saw that their fears were justified. Another boy was carrying things a little too far. However, he was there, and Mrs. Charlton continued to smile under her mushroom hat. And the old nurse did not discourage her. Nurses are given no chance nowadays.

One morning, when the boy was four years old, Mrs. Charlton called Nannie, and they spent a morning together.

The best clothes were put away for grandchildren. Those less good were to be sent away.

Nannie thought much "best" that Mrs. Charlton thought "old."

"Where to, ma'am?" said Nannie, something catching at her throat.

"I have a list here, Nannie dear; you know it must be done. You haven't got much stored away, have you?"

Nannie said "Not much," knowing she had treasures that nothing would induce her to part with. She would fight for them: caps of the boys—garters even—treasures all of them.

She clung to the clothes. As a last hope, combining a respectful threat, she hinted at the danger of giving them away. It invariably resulted in one thing.

"There will be enough of the best if the one thing should occur," said Mrs. Charlton. So Nannie, through her tears, addressed parcels to people she thought quite unworthy of the honour conferred upon them, and hoped that "the thing" might occur. She hoped in vain. Peter remained the youngest of the family. It was a position he would most unwillingly have relinquished. He would have resented turning out of the corners of several hearts. He found the corners most excellent places, and large enough for all ordinary requirements. From one corner he got apples and pears, in and out of their season. To like them out of their season is a taste, not acquired, but natural to boys of his age. From his position in another corner, rides when the horses were exercising. From another corner he could easily reach the cakes hot, as they came out the oven.

On this particular day he was six years old and very busy. He had much to do in the hour that remained to him before Violet arrived. His rabbits were cleaned; the tortoise scrubbed and his garden weeded—nearly weeded. But his various collections were untidy, and he had to find somewhere or other a flea for his microscope; because he was sure Violet had never seen anything so interesting as a flea under a microscope. He thought Tober, the garden boy, would be the best one to apply to. The servants he expected wouldn't like it if he asked them. He did once.

Meanwhile he wondered what married people looked like. He had meant to remember to ask someone if Violet would look very grand; but he had no room on his hanky for another knot.

It's awfully uncomfortable blowing your nose on a knot. Let any grown-up try, and see if they like it!

Tober had no flea handy. He didn't mean to say he never had had, nor wouldn't again. And he wasn't angry like the maids were. He said, "Would an ant do!" And Peter said he supposed it would have to. Tober said, "Seems so, Master Peter."

Anyhow, Peter said he must hurry or he would be late. "Seems so, Master Peter," said Tober.

Peter explained that being the only boy at home, he was naturally busy. Iris was busy; but then girls were busy about stupid things. Hours before Violet could possibly arrive Nannie took up her stand at the window. For the look of the thing, she had a stocking drawn over one hand and a darning needle, threaded, in the other. She had done the same thing ever since the boys began to come home from school. She did it still for the younger boys. Her whole life was spent in watching for another woman's children.

Mrs. Charlton recognised that, and gave her a larger share of the children than most mothers could have afforded to give.

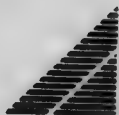
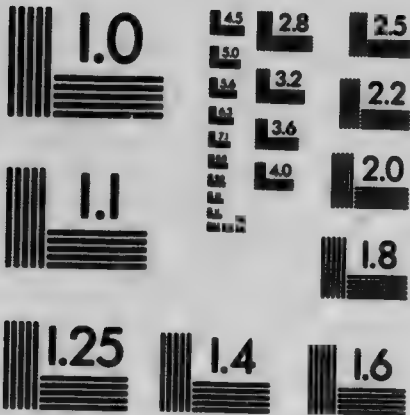
An hour really is a huge time, Peter decided. He thought he'd just go outside and see if there was anything exciting happening. A motor *had* broken down at the lodge the week before; you never knew. It took him a few minutes only to run across the park, out on to the road. With luck, someone might pass.

Luck came his way almost at once. In the distance, swinging along, he saw a figure in black. Peter knew it at once to be the new curate. He had heard him much discussed. Some things relating to him had been spelt. Peter suspected the spelt words to be French ones, which wasn't fair. Whether the curate was high or low, he was, from Peter's point of view, frightfully narrow. Not in Church matters—Peter



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knew nothing about that ; he looked at him from the purely physical point of view.

Nannie was sure he didn't eat enough. Peter said that showed he was frightfully honest, because he *could* have eaten the puddings he carried to old women. And puddings were fattening things ! Mrs. Oldfield didn't eat them and Ferney said that was why.

"Was that why she eats all the toast ?" Peter asked, and Ferney said "Yes."

Peter said it was pretty good cheek, and Ferney said he musn't say that ; no young gentleman ought ! And Peter asked Ferney why *he* wasn't a gentleman ? And Ferney said because he had not been born one.

"Would you have been if you could have ?" said Peter.

Ferney was Peter's butler—not Peter's only, of course ; but he had an enormous corner in Ferney's heart. That position entitled him to corks and bits of tin-foil, great treasures both of them. They came mostly after dinner-parties. Therefore Peter liked dinner-parties, and he generally asked Ferney, anxiously and periodically, when was there going to be another ?

Ferney said they didn't come often now there were eight. Two in the army and Master Peter coming along. Peter asked if "coming along" was expensive, and Ferney said it was very, with boys, not so much with girls.

Peter very naturally asked if boys were more expensive things to have than girls, and Ferney said they were, up to a point.

"Was that why Mother said Father always bought the most expensive things ?" And Ferney said he expected it was. As to dinner-parties, in the old days it had been different. But Ferney wasn't

sure it wasn't best as it was. The honour and glory of a dinner soon passed. Very often there was very little honour and no glory—it depended on the cook.

Then Peter said his mother said the cook did her best. Was that what Ferney meant?

And Ferney said, "I never heard of a woman that couldn't do well but what said it was her best."

"Do they tell lies then, Ferney?"

"Not willingly perhaps, Master Peter," said Ferney, "but they get accustomed to saying half a truth, and in the end it grows to be a whole lie."

"Is Iris the same as a woman?"

"Miss Iris?" said Ferney. "By no means. I never heard Miss Iris tell the smallest untruth."

"I should think she was fearfully honest," said Peter. "She prays every day—for you too, Ferney, and she got out of bed the other night because she had forgotten you."

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged to her for her trouble, Master Peter."

"She likes praying for people. She prays for the names on the outsides of shops sometimes."

Perhaps this minimized the compliment paid to Ferney, on which he was probably priding himself; but if he felt a disappointment he didn't say so.

To return to the new curate. As he approached within whistling distance of Peter, Peter whistled. The curate paid no attention, possibly because Peter over-estimated the carrying power of his whistle. Boys do. If the curate didn't hear, it was possible that Iris wasn't so deaf as Peter said she was—"on purpose!"

When the curate didn't take any notice, a small boy's heart began to sink. It is wonderful how far a small boy's heart can sink; it is out of all proportion to the size of his body.

"Supposin' the curate didn't hear at all!" Peter wetted his lips and whistled again. This time the black figure stopped—he had just got to "secondly" in his sermon for the Sunday following—looked, saw Peter, and came towards him.

"Well?" said Peter.

"Out for a walk?" said the curate, wondering what the boy's name was.

"Not exactly; I ran. I always do."

"I see. What were you running for, Tommy, old man?"

"Not for anything special, and I'm not Tommy."

"But if I choose to call you Tommy, what then?"

"I should think you were trying to be funny, like Mr. Blunt."

"And it wouldn't be funny?"

"Not extra—lots of grown-ups are funny like that. They call Iris 'sobe sides'—at least, one of them does."

"Does she answer?"

"She isn't supposed to—not back, at least—none of us are! I say, there's a woolly bear. I'll take him in my handkerchief for Violet. Wait a jiffy; just keep him for half a sec!"

Peter struggled for his handkerchief; at last he got it.

"That a handkerchief?" said the curate.

"It's knots to remember things. D'you know what that knot is for?"

The curate couldn't imagine.

"Try!"

"To remember to buy sweets with?"

"Bad shot," said Peter; "I never forget that. It's Cherry's birthday. I'm going to give her hairpins."

"Has she got much hair?" asked the curate.

"She hasn't got almost any," said Peter, surprised

at the curate asking such a question. "I don't think it matters. Do you?"

"Not in the least," said the curate. "And what is that one for?" he said, pointing to another knot.

"That one—let me think—I forget."

"And this one?"

"That's private."

The curate felt he had blundered. "And this one?"

"That isn't a knot to remember things; it's got something in it. I wanted another knot to remember to ask about Violet. You don't know about married people, do you?"

"What about them?"

"All about what they are?"

"No, Tommy, that would take an awful lot of knowing."

"Yes, but are they grand—extra grand?"

"Some."

"Is Violet?"

"Who's Violet?"

"Why, she's my sister."

"I beg your pardon."

"You needn't; it wasn't my toe," looking down. "It wasn't anything."

"Thank you; I'm glad."

"D'you like pudding?" asked Peter suddenly.

The curate blushed. "Why?"

"I only wondered."

"Why did you wonder?"

"Because I saw you carrying one to old Mrs. Part."

"And you thought it might be a temptation?"

"Like what you pray, lead us out of," said Peter. "It might!"

He wondered if it would be really any good supposing the pudding was chocolate.

He suddenly remembered the woolly bear. The curate assured him it was all right. He had kept his eye on him.

"But where are you going to put it?"

Peter didn't know. The curate said he would see if he had an envelope in his pocket.

"Grown-ups are sure to," said Peter wisely.

The curate had; he gave it to Peter.

"The rev-er-end—Ja-mes—" spelt Peter, letter by letter.

"James; that's right," said the curate.

"We had a footman once called Jaimpse," said Peter, "and the one now is called that, but he isn't; d'you mind?"

"Not in the least."

"He says his mother doesn't much like it. S-t-a-n-d-i-s-h?"

"Standish."

"Then you are Mr. Standish?"

"I am."

"Mr. Understandish?" said Peter.

"I've never been called that."

"Would your mother mind? Shall I call you that?"

"Do; I think it's a very nice name."

"Well, good-bye," said Peter.

Mr. Understandish went on his way feeling happier than he had been for a long time. He felt as if he had been paid a great compliment, and by a child. Had Peter found him understanding? An understanding heart was what he most earnestly prayed for. To have it would be to possess all things. It was, perhaps, too much to ask. He squared his spare shoulders and swung away.

Peter watched him out of sight. "Mr. Understand-

ing," he said, under his breath, "or was it Understandish? I must tell Iris, just between us two."

Peter looked at the envelope, committed the name to his memory, filled the envelope with moss, saw that the woolly bear was comfortable, and started home.

He remembered something, stopped, turned out his pockets and pulled out the handkerchief. He undid a knot—the one he had said had something in it—and peeled the handkerchief slowly off a bull's eye.

With a pang he remembered he ought to have offered it to Mr. Understand——, but there it was, in his mouth, so it was too late, even if he ran after him. It was the second time; once before it had been in his mouth and he had remembered not to be greedy. He ought to have said it was a bull's eye to Mr. Understand——. If he was so frightfully honest about the puddings, the "lead us out of temptation" would have done for a bull's eye too.

"An hour is a long time!"

Peter looked into every hole on his way home; inspected everything of interest—and there was nothing that didn't interest him—and still the time wasn't over.

So he went and washed. He brushed his hair, wetting it first; then he parted it in the middle, or meant to; then finished it off with a "Tommy Atkins."

A "Tommy Atkins" is a fearfully difficult thing to make! Peter was wont to explain the method as follows: "See? You put your hand like this, then you brush your hair like this, till it's all lovely and smooth and shiny, and then you pull out your hand—sort of slithering out—and there it is, see?"

His mother, meeting him after he had gone through all this, said, "Darling, what a little skinned rabbit!"

and she ruffled his hair and spoilt it all. So he did it again. And still there was time!

Peter dodged his mother when he met her again, and answered her from a distance when she asked him what he had been doing.

"Billions of things! Do you really want to know?"

"Of course, darling!"

"Well, it's like this, you see. I wanted to find a flea most of all, but they're frightfully difficult things to find, because people don't like to say they've got them, if they don't know they have; if they bite, then they have to say—and then they don't. Anyhow, Tober doesn't mind, only he truthfully hadn't got one, so he said, Would an ant do? And I supposed it would have to; and Tober said—I forget what! But an ant isn't the same as a flea, you see, darling. In the microscope a flea's nose looks as huge as anything—simply like this!" Peter showed just how big.

"Cherry it was who didn't like it when I asked. She said her father was a highly respected man! Then, when the tortoise was scrubbed and all the other things were ready, I just went about; and then I went to see if anyone was on the road, and the curate was. Mr. Standish his name is, as well as James, like our James is, but he said he didn't mind. Then he told me things, and I found a woolly bear; its prickles can be dangerous! I said there was nothing to put it in, and he said there was; and there was, because he had an envelope, one of his very own—that's how I knew about his name. He does like puddings, only they're not chocolate ones—not generally—if they were, there's 'lead us out of temptation.' But Mrs. Part is rather old for chocolate, I s'pect. Then I came home and I saw lots of things."

If anyone cares to read the foregoing speech of Peter's very quickly without taking breath, and swallowing hard at intervals, they will know exactly how it sounded to Peter's mother, and will understand why she said "My darling Peterkin, what are you talking about ? I believe you're as excited as I am."

"Are you excited ?" said Peter. "Whatever for ? You didn't see the curate, did you ?"

"No ; but I'm very excited."

"Why ?"

"Because Violet is coming home."

"Is that a thing for you to be excited about ?"

"A very great thing."

"I say, mother, are married people grand ?"

"Some."

"That's what he said. But is Violet ?"

"No, darling ; not grand."

"Well, what ?"

The hour of Peter's waiting was over ; the hour of Violet's arrival had come. Everyone was on the doorstep to meet her, except those whose lack of social position denied them the right.

They only dared to look from upstairs windows, a new housemaid among them. She was inclined to think the praise of Mrs. Egerton's beauty extravagant. There had been pretty young ladies where she had come from, but no old servants. That made all the difference.

Violet bore bravely both the excitement and the scrutiny. She smiled, as she felt Valde would have smiled under the circumstances ; walked as she thought Laura Listowen would have walked ; and laughed as several women she knew might have laughed. It was all very bewildering to the onlooker,

and the housemaid capitulated at once. A cold hand closed over Mrs. Charlton's heart, and Nannie looked away.

Violet kissed everyone, making fun of their demonstrations, and when she got to Peter she said, "Really, Peterkin, I can't kiss you." She patted him on the top of his damp little head, squashing hopelessly and utterly the Tommy Atkins!

Peter got pink to the roots of his eyebrows and swallowed—a dangerous sign in little boys. He hoped Iris wouldn't look. Iris only looked just to see; she would never have done more. She would have died for the happiness of Peter.

She made a vow then and there to photograph the Tommy Atkins with her new "Brownie" camera—life-size, if possible, without the rest of Peter, so as to make it frightfully important.

Mrs. Charlton led Violet into the drawing-room. "We lit the fire, darling, although it is quite warm."

"How darling of you!" said Violet.

Mrs. Charlton knelt in front of the fire, and with the poker rearranged the logs. In so doing she thought to find shelter from the gaze of her daughter under the brim of her mushroom hat. But Violet wasn't looking at her mother. She was arranging her hair before a mirror. "How funny the dear old room looks," she said, just as Valde would have said it. "Nothing changed!"

"We don't change, darling, in three months. It takes years."

"Yes; it's just the same. I suppose it hasn't really changed since I was a child! I used to think it so grand. You still make the fire burn, I see, Mother!"

"Yes, darling, we still squabble over the fire!"

"Poor dears; don't you get tired of it?"

"No—we don't; no two logs burn quite alike."

"And the people about are just as funny!"

"Just as funny."

"They never change!"

"Some of them a little. They seem to get a little kinder—a little softer—as they grow older."

Violet didn't smile. She couldn't laugh as she knew Valde would have laughed, because her mother meant these things. She really thought people got kinder and gentler and softer, whereas it was really herself who did all these things.

"You are really quite smart, Mother. You are 'Higher thought' without knowing it. It's quite the right thing to be!"

"I'm so glad! You must be dying for your tea!"

"Famished!" said Violet.

Ferney brought in the tea. He seemed to take an enormously long time to lay the table. He arranged every cup twice over. At last he left the room, and Violet turned to her mother, raised her eyebrows and laughed, as much as to say, "What an old m—ler!"

"I think, Violet, Ferney was expecting you to say something to him. Do, if you get a chance, darling; he's such a faithful creature."

"Mother, how too quaint! Imagine Valde and their butler!"

"Their butler would hardly be like ours, nor our ways like theirs. Did you like her?"

"She's quite too lovely—for words. She's frightfully—it's so difficult to explain to you what she is like. Everyone bows down to her and worships her, and she—I can't explain—you must see her some day."

"I shall be delighted to fall down and worship too."

Violet doubted it. No word of Dick had been spoken, and she wondered why. She had dreaded too much sympathy. It was curious to get none. She hoped her mother would speak of him before everyone else, and not wait till they were upstairs and alone. She felt shy and miserable. Not so shy and miserable as her mother felt.

"Well, Violet, what news of Dick?" said her father, coming in.

Oh, the relief of it!

"He's very well, and getting on splendidly. He says the life is very interesting. I may not hear for some time now, as he was getting into unbeaten tracks, but he's very well."

"I'm so glad, darling," said her mother, with her head on one side, busying herself with the flame under the kettle.

At that moment another welcome relief in the form of Nannie at the door.

"Dear Nannie, what is it?" said Mrs. Charlton.

"Miss Violet's keys, please, Ma'am."

"Your keys, darling."

Violet jumped up; she had left them in her bag. "Thank you, Nannie. You will know which is which?"

"Yes, thank you, darling—Ma'am."

Another welcome relief in a shout of laughter. Nannie retired flushing. Violet's spirits rose; it was getting easier every moment. She could talk of Dick quite naturally.

"Will you come and see my tortoise, Violet?" said Peter anxiously; "he's waiting for you."

Peter pulled gently at the chiffon scarf which hung round her shoulders. She didn't answer. He pulled it again, gently. "It's a tortoise—a live one—and

there are rabbits too—black ones and white ones—not ord'nary ones."

No answer. He pulled the scarf a little harder, just a "squeeny" bit.

"Pe—ter /" said Iris, "don't bother!"

"Shut up!" said Peter. "I—ris /" as Iris tried to pull him away.

"Violet, I couldn't get a flea, but there's an ant."

"Violet, darling," said her mother, "Peter talking; do just answer him!"

"Yes, Peter, I'll see everything to-morrow; run away."

"To-morrow—things may all be dead," said Peter as he walked away, crushed. He scorned Iris's arm. He shook himself free, and said he didn't want her.

However, Iris knew better. She knew he would want her when he began to feel better. Men do. She walked silently behind him, content to wait her time, quite unconscious of the fact that she was laying the foundations for the making of a very excellent and understanding wife, when her time should come. Brothers are an enormous help to their brothers-in-law to be.

They reached the tortoise house in silence. At a gesture from Peter, Iris began to help him to take down the decorations. If people didn't want to see decorations, they needn't; nobody wanted them to! Besides, the decorations belonged to other things, and couldn't stay up for ever and ever.

"What did this use to be?" said Iris, holding up a strip of red, which had proudly fluttered a flag on the summit of the tortoise house.

"It was a bit of Nannie's garter," said Peter, glancing at it; "she wants it back. It was to show the tortoise was in residence, like kings are."

"The Perks' have a flag," said Iris.

"They didn't ought to have," said Peter.

"But if tortoises do, mayn't they?" said Iris.

"That's diff'rent—the Perks'—I forget why Nannie said they didn't ought."

"You mustn't say 'didn't ought,' Peter."

"I can if I like."

To-day, Iris thought, he might be excused, so she said hastily, "Mother says they are very kind to the poor—I mean the Perks'—Peter."

"Hum?" said Peter.

"I think Violet is a grown-up now; don't you? Is she grown-upper than you thought she was going to be?"

Peter nodded.

"So she is to what I thought—much."

Peter struggled with his tears in bed that night. He clenched his hands, bit his lips, and screwed up his eyes hard, but of no avail. He cried himself to sleep. Nobody knew, "or else he wouldn't have done it."

Mr. Charlton found Mrs. Charlton almost in tears, and when he asked if she were a little disappointed, she broke down.

Perhaps, like Peter, she had been over excited. Perhaps she, too, had had the treasures of her heart waiting to show her beloved daughter.

"Mothers are unreasonable creatures, George; we must respect her reserve and not force her confidence. It is difficult to be tactful with one's own child, when it is such a little while since she was a baby."

Violet awoke next morning to find Nannie gazing at her. It was reminiscent of the days of sulphur and treacle—not so long ago after all. "It's nearly time, darling—Ma'am! I thought I must come and see you before that housemaid comes."

She pulled a stocking over her hand and inspected it. There was no hole in it. She was a little disappointed.

"D'you miss him?" she said. "I can see him lying and looking at you."

She threw up her hands, a stocking on one, a gesture with her signifying admiration, and testifying to her French origin, of which she was proud.

"Nannie, dear!" said Violet, faintly expostulating.

"You didn't know much about him after all, did you? It was a risk, if you think of it. Officers have a name for being flighty, haven't they? They're fascinating, I suppose, and women make fools of them. They begin as friends and it ends with a night in an hotel and the divorce court, doesn't it?"

"My dear Nannie! Have you been reading novelettes?"

"Not specially; I keep my eyes open, that's all. What were the people like you have been staying with?"

"Delightful, Nannie."

"Old servants?"

"I really don't know—yes, very—old keepers and all that sort of thing."

"Were they like your mother?" said Nannie tentatively.

A knock at the door and the housemaid came in. Nannie went out. The housemaid, freshly starched and terrifying, looked round with an aggrieved air, and began to refold the clothes Nannie had folded. She was a housemaid new to Violet, who hastened, by way of propitiating her, to ask her if she had any brothers.

Violet was certain she must have policeman brothers.

"No, she had none."

"Sisters?" said Violet.

"No, Ma'am; they all died in infancy. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, thank you, I will ring if I want anything," said Violet, thereby risking the wrath of Nannie. "The first time," thought Violet, "Mother calls that woman 'dear,' she will give notice, I'm sure."

Violet was about to get up when another knock at the door sent her back into her pillows. "You, Cherry?" she said.

"Yes, Miss, one of my bilious attacks kept me in bed; nothing else would have. Nannie didn't want me to get up as it was—but I couldn't be the only one!"

"I ought to have come to you!"

"Not now, Miss, you're married. I shouldn't expect it. You do look well, Ma'am!"

Cherry was the old maid. She began to fold the clothes the housemaid had refolded.

"Your things lasting, Ma'am?"

"Beautifully, Cherry."

"You do your hair differently, Miss, I'm told."

"Do I?"

"It's not coming out?"

"No—not a bit. Why?"

"I only wondered. I took such care of it, since you were so high!"

Cherry showed how high, and laughed. "Nannie was jealous at first. She soon got over it. She had the young gentleman's hair, hadn't she, unmolested? Can I do anything for you, Miss?"

"Oh, thank you, Cherry, if I want anything I'll ring."

"There's the new housemaid who takes upon herself."

"I know."

"I could wait outside for the matter of that, Miss."

"Or inside, Cherry; it wouldn't be the first time."

"Not now, Miss."

"I'm accustomed to do for myself."

"That's what we don't like, Miss, Nannie and me."

"Dear things," said Violet, as she slipped out of bed. The possibility of Ferney coming to see her did cross her mind, and wondered why not the gardener? When she had had her bath and put on her thrice-folded clothes, by this time hopelessly inside out, she popped her head out of the door. Cherry was there.

"Cherry, my hair!" she whispered.

"Much as she takes upon herself she can't do that," said Cherry, as she slipped through the door. "It's lovely to feel it again, Ma'am," she said, as she coiled up the hair and held it to the light, shaking it out again. She retreated a few steps. "It's just as long."

Nannie, passing Mrs. Charlton's door, knocked, and went in to say if Mrs. Charlton was writing to the Stores, would she remember the ipecacuanha for the village?

"I will, dear Nannie; isn't it a little early for it?"

Nannie admitted the possibility. "She's not changed, Ma'am."

"No, dear Nannie."

"Not when you're alone with her, Ma'am."

Cherry knocked at the door. "You up, dear Cherry! Is it wise?"

"I couldn't be the only one! Miss Violet is just the same—just; I've been doing her hair."

"Happy, Cherry?"

Cherry allowed that the feelings of sickness were passing, leaving her somewhat weak and dithery.

"But happy?"

Cherry wouldn't admit it.

CHAPTER XVI

"I ASKED Miss Blake in to tea," said Mr. Charlton to his wife at luncheon.

"Violet's first day, dearest George!"

"Well, she was so anxious to see her."

"Of course!" said Mrs. Charlton; as if that were an excuse!

"Everyone wants to see her. Mr. Steel said he might look in."

"And who else?"

"Well, the Brewsters and the Hughes," admitted Mr. Charlton laughing. Confession, he knew, was the road to forgiveness.

"The whole village?"

"My Mr. Standing?" said Peter.

"Your Mr. Standing!" said Iris.

"Well, so he is. I talked to him first, so he's mine—bags I him when he comes!"

"What for?"

"To show my tortoise to and my rabbits and lots of other things; all the things that there are to show—bags I him for those—then you may have him for what's left."

"P'raps he won't like your things!"

"He will!"

"Peter, darling, you shouldn't have your best trousers on to-day," said his mother.

"Not Violet's first day?" ventured Peter.

"You young scoundrel!" said his father.

Peter ducked his head—no one respected his

newly-acquired parting. "She's never seen my sailor trousers."

"Change them after luncheon, darling."

Peter nodded.

"Violet, will you help me—you know all about trousers now you're married, don't you?"

"Peter, darling, eat your pudding carefully; you are making a mess."

"Not to eat what's on the cloth, Peter. Must he, Mother?" said Iris.

"Children!"

Miss Blake walked up the drive precisely at four o'clock, full of excitement. A bride to her was always a thing of mystery and romance. In this case she was more than ordinarily interested. She admired Violet immensely.

The roads were dusty. Miss Blake had a primitive way of dusting her boots. She stood on one leg and did something with the other. Whatever it was, she did it twice—first standing on one leg, then on the other. She couldn't let the Charltons see her with dusty boots. She felt it her duty to appear before the world with clean boots. How she arrived at that state of perfection was no business of the world's.

Miss Blake held Violet by both hands, just as Violet had foreseen she would, while she expressed her deepest admiration of the manner in which Violet filled a difficult position. "Dear Violet, just the same!" she said; "and the husband? Good news?"

Violet blushed. She wished someone would come to her rescue.

Miss Blake patted her hand. "You wear ear-rings, I see, dear." Violet admitted it.

"I've got several pairs, but I've always had a

prejudice against them. D'you think they make one look older ? ”

“ Do they ? ” said Violet, looking at Miss Blake.

“ You look such an absurd baby ; I suppose nothing would make you look older. Mr. Standish is very anxious to see you. He photographs. His sister was drowned three years ago. He is our latest acquisition.”

“ Peter's Mr. Standish ? ”

“ Is he Peter's ? ” said Miss Blake.

“ He's all of ours,” said Iris.

“ Have you spoken to him, Iris ? ”

Iris shook her head. She could have, if she had wanted to. Besides, what was Peter's was hers, as a matter of course.

The Brewsters were announced.

Mrs. Brewster saw first of all Violet's ear-rings ; then the wedding ring. With her thumb she felt through her glove the thickness of her own, and decided that Violet's was thicker, which was consistent with the dates of their respective marriages ; then she shook hands with her.

She, too, said Violet looked just the same, with a difference—what was it ?

Violet, blushing, disclaimed any difference, and suggested on pressure, ear-rings.

“ My dear mother used to wear them,” said Mrs. Brewster. “ The first night, dear,” she said, turning to her husband, “ she wore them—the emerald ones—the Prince mistook her for someone else. You remember the story ? ”

Mr. Brewster remembered it perfectly.

Mr. Brewster did not notice Violet's ear-rings ; but he noticed something in the girl's face that the women had not been so quick to see. Before she

went away she had always been ready to laugh with her friends, now she was prepared to laugh at them. He wondered what it was. He remembered—because it had made a very great impression upon him—a friend of Captain Egerton's saying that no one could live with Egerton without being improved. He had thought it high praise. If Mr. Brewster saw any change, it was not for the better. She was undoubtedly very beautiful, but would she ever have her mother's charm of expression ?

"Do come to tea," said Mrs. Charlton. "Dear Miss Blake, you like this corner, I know. Violet, darling, Mrs. Brewster always sits here."

"Violet must remember that," said Mrs. Brewster. "Your own house, Violet—you are not living in it during your husband's absence ?"

"No, Aunt Georgina took it for a time, while she was having something done at Blatherwake, and she found the drains wrong—I believe she always does, wherever she goes."

"Oh, really, how tiresome ! We have a picture of our drains framed and hung up in the servants' hall."

"And you find it answers ?" said Miss Blake, not having clearly heard what it was Mrs. Brewster had framed in the servants' hall, but certain it must be something very excellent.

"Perfectly," said Mrs. Brewster. "We have had no sore throats in the house that we couldn't trace to other causes."

"Since the picture was framed ?" said Mr. Brewster, smiling at Mrs. Charlton.

"Framed, yes. They think more of a thing framed, and Middleton frames so well."

Mrs. Charlton looked at Violet ; did she find all this dull and trivial ?

But Violet was beginning to enjoy it—when Lady Missenden was announced.

Violet flushed—still more so when she saw that behind Lady Missenden walked Laura Listowen.

Her first thoughts were of Ferney ; her next of the Brewsters and Miss Blake. Would Lady Missenden realize, when her mother called him "dear," that Ferney was an old servant ?

Lady Missenden thought nothing of Ferney in her delight at seeing Mrs. Charlton. They met as old friends, as indeed they were, having known each other as girls. "And it was your daughter I met and never knew it. I might have seen in her beauty what I used to envy in yours. And why have you hidden yourself away all these years ? Why didn't you tell me about your mother ?" she said, holding out her hand to Violet.

"You !" said Laura Listowen, affecting a pretty surprise when she saw Violet. "Do we kiss ? It's too ducky of you to live here ; I longed to see you in your own home. Now I shall see how and where the wild rose grew up in its purity and innocence."

"Please, don't !" whispered Violet. "Miss Blake, Mrs. Listowen. I met Mrs. Listowen in Scotland."

"A mutual pleasure, I am sure," said Miss Blake, beaming and eyeing Mrs. Listowen from head to foot. She felt instinctively here was the real thing of which she had, as yet, only read in Court Journals, in the columns of *The Morning Post*, and of which Violet Egerton was but a poor copy.

"I was so sorry about that money," said Violet.

"What money ?" said Laura, opening her eyes wide.

"My aunt wrote about," said Violet blushing.

"Dear old lady, she's always on the make," murmured Laura, and dismissed the subject by

turning to Miss Blake and asking her if she lived in Town.

Miss Blake felt it to be a subtle compliment, and explained that except for an occasional day in London, clothes-hunting, she lived entirely in the country.

"I should never have imagined it," murmured Laura, half shutting her eyes and smiling at Miss Blake. "There are some women who always look smart—don't they?" turning to Violet.

"You have plenty of gaiety, I suppose?" said Laura, still smiling.

"Oh, plenty," said Miss Blake. "We are very gay indeed. We are singularly lucky in our neighbours. Dear Violet met her fate at a dance given by some delightful people. Didn't you, Violet? We knew at once—no Violet, it's no use!"

"And of course you love dancing," said Laura to Miss Blake. "I can see it in your face. I should love to see you in the evening—in blue I think—in that delicious frock we saw at Ducie's the other day, Violet. I do call you Violet, don't I? You remember the one the Princess ordered? Wouldn't it suit Miss Blake?"

Miss Blake was of an uncertain age. She was notorious for her want of taste. Even Mrs. Charlton with all her kindness could only say Miss Blake was injudicious in her choice of clothes; so the cruelty of Mrs. Listowen's fun was undoubted. Violet felt ashamed.

When Miss Blake rose to go, a few minutes later, Violet hoped she had not seen that Laura had been making fun of her.

"So nice to have met you," Laura said. "If you should be in Town, do look me up—telephone!"

Mrs. Charlton saw Miss Blake to the door. When she came back she went straight to Laura Listowen,

drew up a low chair and sat down. Fixing her clear, truthful eyes upon her, she said, "Miss Blake is one of our dearest friends. She takes care of a blind father. Her devotion is most touching."

"How charming," said Laura. "She is probably interested in all blind people."

"Deeply interested," said Mrs. Charlton.

"Forgive me!" said Laura, impulsively. "That, then, accounts for her hat! It was probably trimmed by the blind!"

Mrs. Charlton flushed and withdrew her knee from under the pressure of Mrs. Listowen's hand. "Miss Blake is interested in everything that helps others—she is kind and gentle to all sufferers and pitiful. She would never hurt anyone; she is a true gentlewoman."

"One for me!" whispered Laura to Violet, as Mrs. Charlton got up and walked away.

"Laura, we must be going," said Lady Missenden. "We have a long drive." Then to Violet, "You must come to us for a week-end. I will write about it. You will spare her?" to Mrs. Charlton.

"Just as we've got her home?"

"You must! Good-bye—good-bye!"

"Ta ta," said Laura to Violet; "make my peace with your too darling mother. I know where you get it from now. She disapproves of poor me! I shall see Everard Lang and shall tell him all about you."

The Charltons and the Brewsters watched the departure of Lady Missenden and Laura Listowen. Violet admired the deft way in which Laura put on her motor-veil.

"This dear lady," Laura said, indicating Lady Missenden, "is such a devotee of fresh air."

"It would be a pity not to show the veil," said Mr. Brewster quietly; "it is so much softer than the eyes it matches."

"Good-bye, good-bye!"

"Peter," said Mr. Charlton, "don't do that!"

Peter was swinging his hat by the elastic.

"George, all boys do it," said Mrs. Charlton, protesting.

"And all fathers tell them not to," said Mr. Charlton.

Mr. Brewster chuckled. As the Brewsters walked home, she said to him, "What did you think of that woman?"

"Which?"

"The tall one who came with Lady Missenden."

"What did you?"

"I asked first."

"An ill-educated young woman?"

"She's very smart."

"She certainly put on her veil well."

"You didn't admire her then?"

"Did I say so?"

"No, but I knew."

"You are very clever. I am too much accustomed perhaps to judge women by the standard of Mrs. Charlton."

Mrs. Brewster knew that. "But all women can't be alike," she protested.

"That is very evident."

"D'you think she liked her?"

"Sorry for her, perhaps."

"She'd hate that."

"Possibly."

"She knows royalties. D'you suppose Mrs. Charlton will tell Violet she doesn't like her?"

"Doesn't like the sma an?"

"Yes."

"I think she is too wise to do that and too loyal to set up her opinion against that of royalties."

"I didn't say royalties liked her."

"Surely they need not know her if they don't!"

"Don't be silly. Do you think Mrs. Charlton will pray for her?"

"I think it is quite possible!"

"I wonder if she prays for me?"

"I should say there was no doubt of it."

"Because I have improved so much?"

"Exactly; how quick you are to grasp a thing!"

"Seriously, do you mean it? I think it is very interfering without asking the person's leave. You admire Violet? I saw you looking at her."

"I hoped you hadn't noticed it. I admire all true beauty."

"Not that woman's though?"

"I said true beauty."

Mrs. Brewster sighed. "Seriously—to return to the praying—have people any right to pray for other people without asking their leave, any more than they would have the right to go and consult a doctor about them?"

"The fee might deter in one case—in the other——"

"I wish you would be serious, John!"

"Then you must choose serious subjects to discuss, my dear!"

"I do."

Mrs. Brewster had enough to last her in conversation for the rest of the evening.

Miss Blake had a great deal to think about. She went to bed early. Before she actually got into bed, she rummaged in the wardrobe for something pale blue. She couldn't find anything. After relin-

quising the search, she found that her night-dress case was lined with blue—not a very pale blue.

She turned the case inside out and her nightdress down at the neck. Against her skin she laid the blue lining and looked at herself in the glass. Tears blinded her eyes almost before she could decide that blue was not becoming to her. That woman had been making fun of her then! Her face burned in her pillows. Far into the night she lay awake. When she and her father met at breakfast next morning, for the first time in her life she did not regret his blindness.

CHAPTER XVII

A FEW days after Violet returned, Mrs. Charlton received the following letter :—

“DEAR MOTHER,

“I am glad to here Vi has come home. Is she diffrent. Bays minimus says they generally are but you can't always tell. I nearly won a race on Saturday, but the boys ran fowl and did not keep there coarse they are beasts. That is private between you and me, it's not sneaking because we arranged didn't we ?—it's strickly private. I had a fight yesterday, my nose bled so did his but not bad. Two boys were confirmed yesterday. No more from,

“Your anonimus son,

“MICHAEL.”

“D.S.O.—I ment vaxinated.”

Mrs. Charlton wrote the following letter :—

“DEAREST DICK,

“I know you will be pining to hear news of your darling. I promised to write at once. I am writing by the first mail after seeing her. You will believe me when I tell you how lovely she is looking ! And so well——”

She paused and bit the top of her pen, wondering what she should say next. It should not have been a difficult letter to write, but it was.

“She strikes me, dear Dick, as rather more a woman of the world than she was. This trial must be a great and severe one to you both. I can see in her face

just that difference that the first touch of sorrow brings to a nature as affectionate as hers is."

She paused again. How she wished she could write naturally. Dick would not wish to hear his wife was unhappy; but the fact of being unable to say she was made it so difficult.

"She is reserved even with me, her mother. In fact it is coming home to me that it is with her mother a girl is most reserved. Do we, mothers, expect too much? Do children see the hungry mother-look in our faces, and does it make them shy? I think most mothers must sometimes think so. We must learn to accept everything and demand nothing. She pines for your letters, poor child, I can see, and Nannie says she sleeps with them under her pillow. Is this telling tales, dear Dick? I feel it is what will comfort you, so Violet would be the first one to forgive me. Between you and me, what Michael calls 'strick,' she looked so beautiful in her dressing-gown last night that I had to fetch her father, on some pretext or other, to see her. The children are delighted to have her. She enjoyed her visit to Lochewen very much. Mrs. Raleigh seems to be a dear, kind and beautiful young woman. Violet was devoted to the daughter, Barbara. They evidently spent a great deal of their time together. Violet looks quite lovely in a new green hat. What else, dear boy, can I tell you? My very great love for her makes me realize, at all events to a great extent, the depth of yours. I will do all in my power to keep our treasure well and happy. She is so proud of you. She is a true soldier's wife. It is such a joy to us to have her."

Mrs. Charlton had never written a more difficult letter, nor one that so dissatisfied her. After reading it through, she tore it up. Then she had a good cry

"The child is asleep," she said; "at present she doesn't care."

She then wrote another letter to Dick. She told him about the letters under Violet's pillow, and of her beauty in her dressing-gown, and about Barbara. But the bit about mothers and their daughters she left out. It was not the kind of thing to interest a young man who was hungering for news of his wife. As she finished the letter, Violet came into the room. She went up to her mother and put her arm round her neck. "You still do the accounts?"

"Of course, darling."

"Everlasting multiplication?"

"Division mostly. There seems less to divide than there used to be."

"Really?"

"Really and truly. Rents have gone down—it's the same everywhere. Paul's allowance is bigger than it was—all the boys are more expensive, naturally. It's a question whether Michael can go to Eton."

"He must."

"Not necessarily; except that his father and grandfathers were there before him, there is no reason——"

"Surely," said Violet, "all Charltons!——"

"Charltons may have to change like other people. They need not be the worse for it."

"The brougham is shabby, isn't it, mother?"

"Did you find it much shabbier?"

"I'm so sorry, but I broke the strap letting down the window this morning. Iris said it was weak."

"I am sure it was! Just call Nannie, darling, before I forget. I hear her passing!"

Nannie came in answer to the call. It was one of

her most excellent characteristics that she was always there when wanted. In that respect, as in many others, she differed from a 'bus conductor.

"Nannie," said Mrs. Charlton, "take some blue thread down to the stables and mend the brougham, will you, please?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

Violet smiled. She stood in the deep bay window and looked back into the room where, at the writing-table, sat her mother. She wondered if she ever got tired of writing. "Who taught you to do accounts, mother?"

"The number of my children taught me multiplication and division . . . They always gave me practice. Subtraction I have never mastered . . . Are you writing to Dick?"

"Oh, yes, of course."

"I have written too."

"Then perhaps I won't."

"You must—my letters are nothing compared to yours."

"I find letters abroad so difficult to write. Nothing seems worth saying."

"Yet, I can imagine just what Dick wants to hear."

"Mother!"

"Darling!"

There was a silence. The mother was afraid to say anything. She did not wish to anticipate the confidence of her child and yet she felt that Violet might find it difficult to begin.

"Darling!" she said. She held out her hand. Violet took it and held it a moment against her cheek.

"It's so difficult without Dick."

"Yes, darling, I know."

"I was wondering—don't you think I might have a maid?"

"I suppose so, darling. Did you and Dick discuss the question?"

"In a way. We agreed to be as economical as possible—for a year or two, because of death duties, so I rather—as a matter of course—didn't have one; but it was awkward at Lochewen. Besides, I think it's a save; don't you?"

"It depends so much on the maid."

"Of course—I mean a clever one. You see if I go to the Missendens——"

"I know exactly what you mean, darling. You wouldn't care to have Cherry whenever you wanted her?"

"She might be feeling 'dithery' just at the critical moment."

Mrs. Charlton laughed, and agreed that the excitement might very easily make Cherry dithery. It took so little of anything to do it.

At that moment the new curate, Peter's friend, was announced. He was afraid he had interrupted confidences!

Mrs. Charlton assured him she and her daughter had only been discussing a maid. "Do you want a maid?" he said eagerly.

"My daughter was thinking of having one!"

The curate said he knew such a delightful girl.

"Is she a good maid?" said Violet.

"Strictly speaking, I don't know that she is a maid at all. But she is a most superior young woman."

"How old is she?"

"I really don't know. I was lodging with her mother last spring, and I was struck by the young woman's industry."

"Has she any experience?"

"I should say plenty—if you mean experience in the ordinary sense of the word. She was called up in the middle of the night to go off to a case of sickness. That girl walked miles in the night, and was back at her work—just as usual. She was a most excellent young woman."

"And the invalid—was it a serious case?" asked Mrs. Charlton.

"Very serious; but it got all right."

"It?" said Mrs. Charlton.

"Yes, a pig was ill, poor thing—she was a most thoroughly reliable young woman. You are not laughing at me, Mrs. Charlton?"

"Of course not," said Mrs. Charlton; "how could I laugh?"

"Violet, dear, just pull down that blind; the sun is in my eyes."

"Now, Mrs. Charlton, what I have really come about is this—I have a case I am deeply interested in." The curate hesitated; Mrs. Charlton leant forward in her chair. "Yes?" she said, "and you want me to be interested too?"

"I own that is what I hope for."

"I am prepared to be," and Mrs. Charlton smiled.

"It's a difficult case——"

"The most interesting are the difficult ones."

The curate proceeded to explain that "the case" was a young man, possessed of an extraordinary character. He was violent and unmanageable. Such energy as he displayed in doing wrong would, if diverted into other channels, be an enormous power for good.

Mrs. Charlton nodded; she was ready to believe that. The curate took courage. Mrs. Charlton was

as sympathetic as he had imagined her to be. He had only seen her in Church, where her attitude of devotion had proved an inspiration to him. Just as she had looked then she looked now. Her face was an invitation to sinners; he could see that she was one of those women whose arms were held out to those less fortunate than herself.

He made of the young man an almost picturesque sinner. The world had been against him; it was now closed to him. Would Mrs. Charlton give him a chance?

Mrs. Charlton said she was only too anxious to give everyone a chance. What, in particular, had the young man done?

There lay the difficulty! The curate looked at Mrs. Charlton, wondering how far he could rely on her mercy. There seemed an unlimited supply shining in her eyes; there was tenderness in her mouth, a benediction in her smile.

"He was accused," said the curate, "of trying to murder his mother! That he had no intention of doing so I am perfectly convinced. But I want him to see what a beautiful thing a mother is. I want him to see you sitting among your children. Will you let him? As he comes in, have them all round you—climbing on your knee—you know!"

"I am afraid," said Mrs. Charlton, trying not to laugh, "my children are rather big for that. I would most willingly help the poor young man—but——"

"Just speak to him as you have spoken to me. If you can't speak, smile; if you can do neither, will you lend me Peter? I think an afternoon with Peter—I dare not ask for the little girl——"

"My dear boy—may I call you that? I will smile at your poor young man. Does he love flowers?"

Only the Michaelmas daisies remain; but they are beautiful just now."

"I may bring him! He's quite quiet now!"

"Mother," said Violet, when the curate had gone, "is he quite mad?"

"If he is, darling, we could do with a little more of that kind of madness—he's a strange young man. He would be a charming son to possess."

"And about the maid! What a character! Her only qualification her kind attention to a pig! Mother, he is odd. Talking of maids, Mrs. Listowen has a very good one."

"I should certainly not like you to have a maid of hers. I would infinitely rather you had the girl who is kind to a sick pig. I have no doubt she is an excellent creature. That energy diverted into another channel——"

"There, Mother, you are laughing at the curate!"

"Just as I should laugh at him if he were my son."

"Do you never look at a young man without thinking of him as your son?"

"I am sometimes glad he is not."

That same morning after breakfast Mrs. Brewster said to Mr. Brewster, "What was the name of that man who was so impressed with Violet Egerton, the night she met Captain Egerton? He wrote to Lady Bailey afterwards, and asked her to ask Violet to meet him."

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Mr. Brewster, who was trying to read *The Times*.

"Yes, you have!"

"You know best, my dear!"

"Seriously, he was rather a swell, and he said he had never met anyone like Violet and Lady Bailey,

said he had been in Vienna and ought to know. Do answer ! ”

“ I am trying to find the name in *The Times* ! ”

“ As if you could ! ” said Mrs. Brewster impatiently.

“ If he is the real swell you say he is—by the way, I don’t like the expression—it is impossible that a paper like *The Times* can ignore him in these days of competition.”

Mrs. Brewster sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

“ Ah, I have it, I think,” said Mr. Brewster, looking over his glasses ; “ Sir Everard Lang, wasn’t it ! ”

“ How clever of you ! ”

“ You must thank *The Times*, not me. It’s quite wonderful, and all for twopence ! ”

“ If you belong to the library ! Yes, that was it : Sir Everard Lang. I wonder if he minded her marrying Captain Egerton ! ”

“ Why should he ? It’s a free country. Women may marry whom they choose.”

“ Yes, but she didn’t give Sir Everard a chance.”

“ Men must make their chances.”

“ John, you are tiresome ! What would you like for dinner ? ”

“ That is a question I can never answer within an hour of breakfast. It is to me the most admirable of women’s many good qualities that they can think of ordering dinner at ten o’clock in the morning. They have either short memories, excellent digestions, or very wonderful characters. I suspect the latter.”

Mrs. Brewster went off to the kitchen, feeling herself to be the most injured of women. Yet she had no accounts to worry her, and her brougham was in admirable order. There was an electric light in the roof, and yet she wasn’t happy.

They did not dine out enough to justify its existence.

When people asked Mrs. Charlton who Mrs. Brewster was before she married, Mrs. Charlton always said she had forgotten. It would have been more accurate to say she didn't know. No one did. It was even said by some that Mrs. Brewster didn't know herself.

"Why did Mr. Brewster marry her?"

There again Mrs. Charlton didn't know. But she always said she made Mr. Brewster an excellent wife. "She is an excellent manager and keeps her servants."

People smiled at that. Did Mrs. Charlton think that people thought that was all she held to be necessary in a wife?

Mrs. Charlton liked Mr. Brewster, he was so kind. It sometimes struck her that it was born of that very kindness out of pity that he had married Mrs. Brewster. But she did not say so to anyone.

Mrs. Brewster, perfectly unaware of the fact that her husband was kind to her, ordered the brougham for four o'clock.

At half-past she drove up to the Baileys' door and asked if Lady Bailey was at home. She had known herself to pray, as she stood on a door-step, that the person she was going to call upon might be out. But to-day she was full of courage, inspired by a new hat, and she was glad Lady Bailey was at home.

The footman drew down the bolt and threw open the double doors. They could comfortably have admitted several Mrs. Brewsters.

"My dear Mrs. Brewster, this is too delightful," said Lady Bailey, "I was just wishing someone would come, no matter who! I was feeling so dull. You will forgive me if I don't get up, I have just sorted all my wools!"

It flashed through Mrs. Brewster's practical mind

that Lady Bailey would have to get up for tea, at least, she hoped so. She had said at home that she would be out to tea, therefore, it was no use going home for tea. If Mrs. Brewster kept her servants, they kept her in order.

"What news?" said Lady Bailey.

"Violet Egerton has come home!"

Mrs. Brewster reminded Lady Bailey that she was mainly answerable for the marriage. Lady Bailey admitted the responsibility. But the separation!

"No baby coming I suppose?"

Mrs. Brewster thought it would have shown better taste on the part of Lady Bailey if she had just raised her eyebrows. It would perfectly have conveyed her meaning.

"I really didn't ask," said Mrs. Brewster, "I shouldn't think so."

She didn't say she wouldn't dream of asking. She rather let Lady Bailey think that she could have asked if she had thought of it.

"She looks well?" said Lady Bailey; "she hasn't lost her colour?"

"No."

"Oh, then, there probably isn't. It's very sad for the young things being separated so soon."

"They *are* very devoted, I suppose," said Mrs. Brewster.

"Is there any doubt? Surely not?"

"Of course not! I said they *are*."

"Yes, but in a way rather to suggest doubt."

"I didn't mean to."

"Men were always tremendously attracted by Violet. I don't suppose they will be less so now. It seems to me dangerous."

"Who was *the* man?"

"Mr. James ?"

"No-o," said Mrs. Brewster; "some rather well-known person."

"Everard Lang ? He was swept off his legs completely. I never saw a man of his age so foolish. In fact he rather resented—I thought—well perhaps he didn't; it's difficult to tell with men of that kind——"

"Who have been to Vienna and all that ?" said Mrs. Brewster.

"I beg your pardon !" said Lady Bailey, puzzled.

"Oh, nothing ! What about the Missendens ?"

"What about them ? I know nothing that Debrett doesn't. The neighbourhood say they are coming here to economise. From what I can hear there are very few signs of it. Everyone says Lady Missenden is charming. Frances—our niece, you know—loves her. By the way, she loves quite a vast number of people. The question that is worrying us is, Who loves her ? I am afraid she is wasting her affections on someone. She is such a delightful girl. To return to the Missendens, it is his rôle in life to be charming, and that in a man costs money, doesn't it ? A woman can be charming without it costing anything. Of course, the daughter married our nephew, John Bailey. But we have never come much in the way of his wife. We shall now perhaps. She's quite delightful, I hear. And so is the boy, Claridge. There was a very smart woman with them last Sunday."

"Tall, with lots of colour about her ?"

"Yes, tall certainly, and the usual amount of colour in the usual places—lips, cheeks ; rather well done, I thought."

"Yes, and dark red hair, and a large mouth, and long ear-rings, and a wonderful figure ?"

"Yes—I daresay; I heard she was thought very smart."

"She was at the Charlton's the other day."

"Did she and Mrs. Charlton mix well? Mrs. Charlton gets on with every one, doesn't she?"

"I'm not sure. She certainly finds good in most people."

"Yes, she's a dear, but just a little too—how shall I put it?"

"Fond of men's admiration?"

Lady Bailey laughed long and heartily. She had not meant that. But then she did not live with Mr. Brewster.

Mrs. Brewster was a little nettled. She didn't like being laughed at. Tea came as a welcome distraction. She discovered her hostess had not to rise for tea. The table was placed in front of her, and the tablecloth she arranged over her wools.

The two women proceeded, in a very mild way, to discuss their neighbours. No one's character was much damaged when they had done with it. "I heard Lady Missenden ask Violet to go there for a week-end," said Mrs. Brewster.

"That will amuse her."

"I wonder if she is a flirt!"

"Is she?"

"I said, 'I wonder.' She is very young to be left."

"Yes, it's so different; it's not as if she were a girl, is it? It makes all the difference, n'est-ce-pas? Vous comprenez?"

Mrs. Brewster blushed, as she always did if anyone spoke French to her, no matter how English it was. She also blushed because, in spite of being married, she was an old maid.

Feeling she had got on to a dangerous subject, she returned to that of Lady Jane, which, as a subject, was all that could be desired, although, after what had happened, Lady Bailey might find it a slightly difficult one.

"Isn't it a little awkward not knowing Lady Jane?"

"Awkward? No, not awkward. Take things as they come. Never impute motives to others you wouldn't wish imputed to yourself, and then no awkwardness arises. I said to my husband, "When I meet, if ever I do meet John's wife, I shall be dignified. I shall show her very gently that her behaviour has not been gracious—but nothing more. I shall make no advances; but it is my duty, as a Christian, to accept what is offered, but with dignity, of course!"

"Should you kiss her?" asked Mrs. Brewster, whose thirst for knowledge on things social was insatiable. Those papers that answered queries as to the number of cards that should be left after dining were her greatest joy and comfort.

She would hesitate to pen the question which was now troubling her. Supposing she found the courage, she determined to word it thus: "Should the wife of a baronet kiss an earl's daughter married to her husband's nephew, on first meeting her, when she has shewn no desire to meet the said wife of the aforementioned baronet?"

She should put it quite plainly like that. She wondered what the answer would be. It would be simpler to put the case to Lady Bailey; but she doubted whether Lady Bailey had been a baronet's wife long enough to know.

The door was thrown open and Lady Jane Bailey was announced.

Lady Bailey sprang up, and her thimble, her scissors, and all her wools were scattered on the floor.

"Oh, let me!" said Jan, down on her hands and knees in a minute.

Mrs. Brewster was surprised at a lady in her own right—was she in her own right?—doing such a thing. Of course, she was very pretty and exquisitely dressed; she could perhaps afford to do queer things. The Missendens were thought a little peculiar by some people.

"Dear Aunt Lucy, I am so sorry," said Jan. "You worked all the chairs, didn't you? Jack has told me! Now we really mustn't waste any time; we must know each other at once. I feel I do! Jack has described this room; I know it so well! Is that the screen he used to play with when he was a little boy?"

Jan jumped up and went to the fireplace, in front of which stood an old-fashioned screen. "It has a spring somewhere, hasn't it?"

"Fancy Jack remembering that!" said Lady Bailey. "There's no spring!"

"No spring?" said Jan. "But I'm almost sure. There must have been another screen!"

Lady Bailey went on beaming. Mrs. Brewster was getting a little anxious. She was afraid Lady Bailey was going to fall a too easy victim to a niece who had up till now practically ignored the relationship.

"And the mother-of-pearl counters in the shapes of fish?"

"In this cupboard," said Lady Bailey, by this time on her hands and knees before the cupboard. Jan knelt beside her. It was a scene Mrs. Brewster could never have imagined. She had thought Lady Bailey too stout for such things.

"Since we've been married," said Jan, "we have been so busy. You know what it is settling down. For one thing, I have had to get accustomed to John. He's so like you! Of course, he oughtn't to be. It is Uncle Fred he should be like! But perhaps you and Uncle Fred have grown alike. Married people do! At present John and I are quite unlike. You see, my nose—it's quite unlike John's!"

Lady Bailey thought it a delightful nose, but she couldn't say so; she was too bewildered to say anything, never in her life having come across anything so radiant as this being who sat beside her on the floor.

Involuntarily she said, "How happy you look, my child!"

"I am!" said Jan. "If a woman isn't happy when her baby is coming, when will she be happy?"

Mrs. Brewster's face froze into a look of horror.

"Frances told you, I hope," said Jan. "Dear Frances, she has been so sweet about it! We shan't have room for her."

"You look such a baby yourself!" said Lady Bailey. She was almost in tears—why, she could not have said. It was a feeling that came over a good many people when they saw Jan. There was something touching in her belief in the goodness of the world. It would be mean of the world to take advantage of her trust.

Lady Bailey was growing a little uncomfortable. She suddenly realised she was there for the rest of the afternoon. It was years since she had sat on the floor. Mrs. Brewster was shocked.

She thought both Lady Bailey and her niece showed a great want of reserve; yet she was quite certain Mr. Brewster would admire Lady Jane. She wished she knew what people of the world would think of her.

That she was very fascinating was undeniable. She believed there was no one else on earth who could have got Lady Bailey down on to the floor. It suddenly struck her she might help her up. Which she did. When Jan had gone Lady Bailey said she was afraid she had not behaved with dignity.

"Who could?" said Mrs. Brewster generously.

"She is the loveliest creature I have ever seen. Fancy her knowing about the screen!"

Lady Bailey walked over and looked at it. "It is the same screen. It must be twenty years since Jack broke that spring. We never told him."

"She's not really as beautiful as Violet," mused Mrs. Brewster.

"Violet has never thrown her arms round my neck," said Lady Bailey.

"I suppose you couldn't really have been stiff with her," said Mrs. Brewster.

"I might, I suppose, just as long as an icicle could remain an icicle in a kitchen fire. How could anyone remain stiff with that face smiling at them?"

"Of course, it's manner, isn't it? But for all that, why should she have ignored you up to this?"

"Well, she didn't ignore us. She simply didn't take any notice of us, which is quite a different thing, and we made no advances. Then, as she said, she had to get accustomed to John. I know what that means! To get accustomed to a Bailey takes time. I felt no resentment against the child, so I couldn't show it."

"Naturally," said Mrs. Brewster. She fell to wondering what it would be like to be able not to resent a relative of Lady Jane's standing taking no notice of one. It would be awkward to have a Lady Jane in the family and not be able to mention her. It would be a waste, socially.

When Mrs. Brewster got home she at once told her husband in what a very difficult position Lady Bailey had been placed.

When she ended up by saying that Lady Jane was perfectly lovely, and had thrown her arms round Lady Bailey's neck, Mr. Brewster said he could see no difficulty at all in the situation. He imagined most people would be quite pleased to find themselves similarly placed.

"But she has ignored the relationship up till now?"

"Has she?"

"Well, practically! John, Lady Bailey is considered quite the thing, isn't she?"

"The thing?"

"You know what I mean!"

"I think she is a most estimable woman!"

"Grand relations don't know one because one is estimable. John, I can't get Lady Jane's face out of my head. I do hope she won't die! She looks all the time like a child who sees a Christmas tree for the first time. That doesn't describe it—don't laugh at me!"

"I'm not laughing; I did not credit you with so much imagination."

"But it's so silly!"

"I think I like you silly best!"

"I didn't like the way she spoke about the baby. Why not?"

"Well——"

"I should think it must be a very-much-to-be-envied baby."

"But it's not to be for some time."

"That does not alter my opinion. If I were a baby I should like to have just that sort of mother waiting for me. I must see Lady Jane!"

CHAPTER XVIII

"I WISH, darling," said Mrs. Charlton to Violet, "if you have time, you would go down the village. I hear several of the old people have been dressed in their best every afternoon since you came home. Do go!"

Violet went. She was shy. She seemed to have grown away from these old people. She had looked forward to coming back with Dick: that would have been amusing. Dick loved old people.

Mrs. Enticknap's cottage was the first she came to. She walked between the borders of early chrysanthemums and late roses, and knocked at the door. "It is you, Miss—Ma'am, I should say. Please to walk in; you're welcome, I'm sure."

Violet walked in. "There's your little chair, the same as what you used to sit in when you were so high." Mrs. Enticknap was careful to show how high. "No, it's strong, it won't break."

Violet looked round for familiar landmarks. They were all there—the china on the dresser; the chintz frill on the mantelshelf; the old fire-dogs. She was glad to see them again.

"Does the clock still strike wrong?"

"Yes, just the same, Miss. We don't like changes. It struck so the day my poor mother died, having struck right up till then. I was looking at the clock, which said three o'clock, and I was just going to say, 'It's just twelve hours since poor mother went,' when the clock struck four, so we left it. It's kept wonder-

fully well that much wrong. You'd have expected it to get worse, wouldn't you, Miss ?—things do. I'm glad to see you looking so well ; glad to see you *can* get about ! ”

“ Get about ? Oh, yes, of course ! ” Violet blushed.

“ It's nice, Ma'am, when they don't come too soon. There's my Liz with five under six—twins last. She don't hardly know which way to look, with a cradle each side ; her head first this way, then that, going all the time. They're not of an age to feel jealous, that's one thing. She's a good mother is Liz. She doesn't complain.”

“ They might have been triplets,” said Violet.

“ So they might, Ma'am, as lief as two.”

“ Our gardener's wife had triplets.”

“ Did she now, Miss ? Indeed ! ”

Violet talked a little longer, then left.

“ I'm glad to see you able to get about Miss,” were Mrs. Enticknap's last words.

She next went to see the gardener's wife.

“ You do look well, Ma'am ! ” Violet was so afraid that she was going to say how glad she was to see she could get about that she hastily said how pretty the garden was looking.

“ Yes, Ma'am, it does, doesn't it ? Stock, he's very clever with his work, though I say it as shouldn't. He's fond of things that weep, though we're happy enough. You don't blame us for that, do you, Ma'am ? Trees that won't weep, he makes weep.”

“ He's a very clever gardener, Mrs. Stock.”

“ So he is, Ma'am ; he owes it to me in a sense, if a man will own he owes anything to a woman ! ”

“ What did you do ? ”

“ Well, I chose between two places, so to speak, one over Faring way and this. I said, ‘ Far be it from

me to dictate; but to my mind it hangs on the scullery!' We've had no cause to regret the choice."

"And we have every reason to be very grateful to the—scullery," said Violet.

"Well, Miss, there's two ways of looking at everything. You've got a nice garden yourself, I'm told?"

"Very nice, but we want a Stock!"

The conversation flagged after that. Violet, looking round for inspiration, espied on the mantel-shelf two terra-cotta statuettes, one of Beethoven and one of Gladstone.

"I didn't know Stock was an admirer of Mr. Gladstone's," she said.

"Oh, he always did like all them old ornaments, Miss!"

From an attempt at politics Violet plunged into Church matters, and asked Mrs. Stock if she liked the new curate. Was it true he was very high church?

"I did hear tell something of the kind, Ma'am, but I didn't take no notice. He's a good lodger, they say. Things get told wrong, don't they? There's those who are high and those who are low. They mean well, and they come out at the same place after all. I incline one way myself, not caring for flumeries, but there! Cellaby may be right for those who can read the text, 'Increase and multiply,' otherwise than it says plain and reasonable. 'Increase and multiply' the Bible says, and you can't do that in a monastery! That's all I say!"

"Talking of politics," went on Mrs. Stock, "I always say it's good of gentlefolks to go mixing themselves up with things that don't concern them, and they don't get paid for it, mind you, Miss, which is the thing that most strikes us poor people. Stock

says it will be a bad day when they do. Stock says 'Pay and pollute.' He means in politics, of course. He says they're clean now for cleanliness sake; nothing to gain by bein' in them. But put someone in as is in want of money—then comes the danger! It's a deal gentlemen do for folks like us, but most of the things we don't want. You can't understand the things that concern the poor till you've lived the life; and if you've lived the life then you aren't educated, so it's no good."

"But the labour members do understand, don't they?" said Violet, bewildered.

"Not a bit of it, Miss. They start out poor; but once in politics it's riches for them. It turns their heads and they see things hindpart before, or so it seems to me."

"But it's right to give the people land, isn't it, Mrs. Stock?" said Violet. "If they become landholders, then they feel they have a stake in the country."

"Don't you believe it, Miss, the stake they want is a beef-steak, though I'm not partial to it myself, not having the teeth for it. They can't keep their gardens tidy, let alone land. And if you gave them land they'd want the best bit your father has. They wouldn't take the good with the bad and be thankful it's not worse, as your father does. They know what's good, but why should they have it? Stock knows his place better than to ask it."

"You're a tremendous Conservative, Mrs. Stock!"

"I call no one names, least of all myself, Miss. It's enough for me and Stock to serve your father and mother. We only wish we had little ones to go on doing the same by the next generation. But there, the Lord gave and the Lord took away. I never can bring myself to go on with the text, and I don't see

how the best woman in the world could, with honesty to herself. She can say it of other people's children—at least, some can. I should find it hard to do that myself. I hope it won't happen to you, Miss. It's early days to be separated, although I'm not sure it wouldn't be worse, the more you are accustomed to each other. I'm not sure I don't watch for Stock to come up the garden path more anxiously than I did when we first married. He's fell twice lately. Good-bye, Ma'am ! ”

Mrs. Stock watched Violet out of sight, and then stepped across to see Mrs. Enticknap, and agreed with her that it was nice to see Mrs. Egerton able to get about. Mrs. Stock hoped she wasn't getting ideas into her head.

“ Ideas ! ” said Mrs. Enticknap. “ Miss Violet, never ! ”

“ Politics,” said Mrs. Stock, “ they're a danger with women—the educated more than with us. They understand things up to a point, and then that's a danger. They have more time to give to things that don't matter.”

“ They do matter in a sense,” said Mrs. Enticknap.

“ Not with women,” said Mrs. Stock. “ Let them look after the men. Make better men, and you'll get better politicians. You can't do it the other way round. A good politician doesn't mean a good man. Mr. Charlton's giving a tea and sports up in the meadows, so he tells Stock,” said Mrs. Stock.

“ Yes ; I met Mrs. Beal's poor old mother ; she told me.”

“ Is she goin' ? ” said Mrs. Stock.

“ She said she would if she could borrow a patch.”

Mrs. Stock pursed up her lips. “ What colour ? ” she said.

"I shouldn't think as how it would matter so long as it wasn't new lookin'. I don't suppose anyone knows what the dress was eventually."

"I've got an old green skirt——"

"I was just looking and I found a brown——"

"Not you, Mrs. Enticknap. You've got the children to cut up for. I'll send my green along."

Violet knocked at Mrs. Mayberry's door. She was bidden to come in.

"Right in, and mind the pail of water!" The old woman was in bed in the kitchen to save another fire.

Violet sat down on the edge of the bed. "Will it be uncomfortable for you if I sit here?" she said gently.

"No springes to hurt, Miss," said the old woman laughing. "It's comferable enough for all that. My children were born in it—that makes it soft lying—memories—I lie and think. Yes, I've been ailin' for a long time. But I'm getting on fine. It isn't every-one as can afford to lie in bed, there's that to be said. I says to my son there's more queens than queens think for! That's just my joke! I'm a queen, and my big son he comes in and he does just what I tell him, and he brings me flowers. No queen could have more. I've never seen jools, so to speak, but they can't come up to flowers, with dew-drops on 'em."

"Do they?" said Violet, holding out her hand. On her finger was a ring. The diamonds flashed and sparkled.

"So that's jools!" said the old woman thoughtfully. "They do spark, and no mistake. I've seen cottage windows do that, evenin' time. I've been right glad to see it when I've been comin' home from harvestin'. Yes, jools are lovely, but for the likes

of me I think a monthly rose with dew-drops on it is more homelike; that's what it comes to with us, Ma'am—homelike. We don't set store by the things the rich do; a good man, then a good son—no queen could have more. Take our Queen Victoria, Ma'am, there never was a better; but I didn't feel for her anything special till she lost her man. She was a Queen till then—out of our reach, so to speak—but when she lost her man there wasn't a woman in England that didn't turn to her in her sorrow. A prince is a man, and a queen's a woman, when all's said and done. It's a woman's head that the crown rests on."

Violet looked at the tiny old face with its twinkling eyes.

"Where do you learn all this, Mrs. Mayberry?" she said.

"Learn? I never was one to learn! I just lie and think. Things come up, and then I think of them. I shall think of jools when you've gone. I shan't think anything against them, because of the gates of Heaven being made of them, and the floors! When I cleaned my floors I used to lay a newspaper down. They can't do that in Heaven. You do look beautiful, Ma'am, and your man away!"

This was very primordial and embarrassing.

"And left you alone?"

"Yes, he's gone on a very long journey."

"Now, if the little one was coming, that would be something to show him when he got back! Is it?"

"No, no."

"Ah, they are blessings, they are! My big son—he's cutting wood now, hear! He don't take no wife. I can't seem to fathom it! A big, fine fellow like that! The girls come round like flies; terrifying

they are, asking after me—me!" the old woman laughed and winked at Violet. "He's the same answer for them all, 'Mother's gettin' on fine,' and back to his chopping. He never stops, hear! And so I am getting on grand!" she motioned to Violet to come nearer. Violet bent her head down, and the old woman whispered something in her ear. Violet lifted her head; she was blushing.

"They've come up beautiful again, Ma'am; I'm gettin' on!"

"I must go, Mrs. Mayberry!"

"If you must, you must! But it's a short visit! But there, your mother's wantin' you. She was hungerin' for you to come back. She says to me, only last week, 'We mothers know what it is, Sarah.' That's true; that's true! My son he's cuttin' wood for me 'gainst the winter comes! When I was bad, some time back, he stopped cuttin'. He didn't know I noticed! I knew he didn't look to see me next winter; but he's begun again. He's cut a pile, he has, and willingly! When I'm gone he's goin' to foreign parts. It's the same now with all the young ones; they must see new things. It's nat'ral enough—the homes grow too small; it's nat'ral. You'll see him outside, Ma'am. Mind the pail!"

Violet walked home through the park, into the garden and round by the potting-shed. She looked in; it was empty. She sat down on the handle of a wheelbarrow and cried. She felt miserable. These people, in their simplicity, had wounded her—outraged her most sacred feelings.

"You get the earth, see? and I'll plant it!" said a voice outside. It was Iris. Peter rushed in. "You here?" he said. "Are you sitting on the earth?"

Violet pointed to a sack. Peter stopped, looked at

her, and got rather pink. It was a matter of honour with him and Iris that if either one of them cried the other shouldn't look. But this was different. Violet was grown-up and wasn't supposed to cry.

"Were you crying?"

"No."

Peter drew a breath inwards. That was a whopper, although, he knew, not one of the worst kinds.

"Is it because you are married? Emma says she'd rather not be married than be married like what you are. Is that it?—I mean, why you are—you know what?"

Violet told him it wasn't.

"Then you *are*!" he said.

Then he asked if it was because she was sad? And she said it was. He hugged her to make up. Did it? Nearly.

Peter smiled. "You hold the sack open like that, and I'll get the earth out. We're busy."

"Gardening?"

"Sort of."

"Shall you marry when you grow up, Peter?" asked Violet.

"Ra—ther not!" said Peter, as he busied himself with the mould. "Wait a jiff, while I blow my nose! Lend us a hanky. If the others don't marry, then it would be my duty, wouldn't it?"

"Certainly; an absolute duty."

"Was it because of that you did?"

"No, no."

"I don't see much fun in being married, do you? Mrs. Bunting's husband beats her. Emma says so."

"Why does Emma tell you these things?"

"She doesn't; she tells Nannie, and I listen—when I'm asleep."

"You ought to say you are listening; it would be more honest, Peterkin!"

"What's more honest?"

"Telling that you're listening."

"Yes, but what is it?"

"What?"

"More honest, what you just said."

"What is more honest?"

"Yes."

"Saying that you are listening instead of pretending you're asleep."

"Not that; what is it? Is it the same as honest?"

"Yes, you know it is."

"Well, then, Iris and I can't be more than we are. We are trying to be things we can't all the day long. When can we be an uncle; that's what we want to be?"

Peter looked anxiously at Violet. He stopped shovelling earth into flower-pots. "Me an uncle, and Iris an aunt. *Could* you tell us, please? We'll never say if you tell us. We want to know specially. We've got a plan, and it's no use unless we know. When can it be? How soon can people be?"

"Don't be silly, Peter! There, your pots are full. What are you going to plant?"

"I shan't tell you," said Peter huffily. "If you won't tell me, no more won't I tell you. Come on, I—*ris*!"

At the hall-door, waiting for Violet, stood her mother. In her hand she held a telegram. "This has come; shall I open it for you?"

"No, thank you; I will."

Violet took it. She thought it might be from

Everard Lang. Her mother hoped, yet feared, it might be news of Dick.

She walked away.

"Mother!"

"Yes."

"It's from Lady Missenden, asking me to go there to-morrow. Shall I?"

Her mother looked at Violet, saw the traces of tears on her face, and said she thought she had better go. "It will be delightful for you, darling, and Cherry isn't in the least bilious."

Violet laughed and wrote an answer. "Can this go, Mother?"

"Certainly; take it round to the stables and ask Jacob to see it goes directly the men have had their tea; then come and have yours."

As they sat at tea, Mrs. Charlton said, "How did you find the old people?"

Violet said they were quite all right. Mrs. Charlton asked no questions; she saw something had upset Violet. The old people and their sayings had, at one time, delighted her.

"If ever I feel depressed I have only to go and see my dear old Sarah!"

"Absurd old person!" said Violet. "It is extraordinary," she said a few minutes later, "that those women should be so fond of their children."

Mrs. Charlton cut a cake thoughtfully, "And yet," she said, "it's very natural. . . . Poor Mrs. Beal has gone to the workhouse with her five children. . . . It was the only thing to be done. . . . Beal is a hopeless drunkard. . . . We have done what we can. . . . She must be worse before she is better. . . . It must be brought home to the poor, weak man. . . . She says the children are well cared for . . . she

is very grateful for that. . . . She was given the choice of work . . . she chose scrubbing. It's very hard work; but while scrubbing, there is just a chance that her children may cross the passage. . . . She says the under-matron is so kind . . . she lets her help to bath the children twice a-week—and she lets her bath her own."

"Don't, Mother!" said Violet.

CHAPTER XIX

SIR EVERARD was at the Missendens. A chance remark made by a man in the smoking-room had rekindled his interest in Violet Egerton. It was evident that it was a only matter of time, and she would be the fashion. He had rather avoided thinking of her lately. The expedition in Africa was assuming rather an ugly look. He felt he would have to answer to Lady Blatherwake for his interest in young Egerton. On the other hand it was quite certain that if Egerton came through it all right he was a made man. In his most expansive moods Everard Lang promised himself the pleasure of standing god-father to the first baby. When a man can think of himself, with equanimity, as god-father to a baby, it is quite certain his feelings for the mother are of a purely platonic nature. With that conviction he consoled himself. The rôle of god-father suited him. The nurses always approved of him, and he had followed, on two or three occasions, Sidney Smith's advice, with unvarying success.

As he took his seat beside Violet Egerton at tea, he felt certain that nothing disagreeable could happen to anything so radiantly beautiful as she was. Sorrow was to him disagreeableness in an acute form. He looked at her, noting with satisfaction a growth in things worldly, without the loss of her spiritual expression. Violet, safe from all primordial curiosity, blossomed like a flower under the warmth of the admiration she excited. She was pleased to feel in her element, more pleased that she felt it her element.

She had grown beyond the home atmosphere. She could no longer find all she wanted, of excitement in life, in the progress of the postman's baby.

Lord Missenden smiled at her. Lady Missenden smiled because he smiled. It was her amiable and wifely duty to find amusement for him. A pretty woman satisfied his eye in exactly the same way—he was careful to explain to the world—that a picture did.

To his wife he offered no explanation; none was needed. It was quite charming to see the way in which she sought artistic treasures for him—outside the world of painting and sculpture. Those she admitted were beyond their means. When some flippant person suggested that to admire beautiful women in the flesh was even more expensive than buying their portraits, Lady Missenden looked at him with her calm, beautiful eyes and said, "We do not find it so!"

The story was told against her, or in her favour, that calling upon a friend, she sat in the semi-darkness talking to a strange young woman. She frankly owned she was bored until the lights were suddenly turned on. When she saw to what manner of person she had been talking she said, "Oh, I had no idea you were beautiful; do come and stay with us! When will you come?"

It was not often she found anyone so beautiful as Violet.

Lord Missenden, sure of his wife's sympathy, continued to smile at Violet; so did Sir Everard. They later agreed she was perfectly beautiful. They sought to discover in what lay her great beauty. Each thought he knew, but neither said. They went on wondering. The John Baileys were also of the party.

The Listowens were coming later. Violet was sorry to hear that.

Frances Bailey and Captain Stuart were already there.

She was glad of that. He, too, smiled at her.

A strange young man leant forward, with a tea-cup in one hand and a piece of muffin in the other, and smiled at her too. She would have been surprised if he hadn't.

She enjoyed it all immensely.

"Isn't Violet Egerton lovely?" said Jan. "And doesn't she love it all?"

Frances nodded, and said she knew it would come. She had told Valde there was no fear that the social sense wouldn't develop. It must have been a little disturbing to Sir Everard to find she had got on so well without him.

"Who did it?" asked Jan.

"No one," said Frances. "It was latent. I saw it at Lochewen. She was beginning to feel her feet then."

Jan nodded wisely. She was going to be amused. There was nothing she enjoyed more than looking on. She usually found others to watch with her.

The strange young man, feeling himself to be socially a probationer, and not having as yet contributed to the success of the party, said in a cheerful voice, "Nasty business, this African job!" Those who heard stopped smiling. Violet, not having heard, smiled on, and suffered a momentary chill. She wondered what she could have said to make Captain Stuart suddenly change in his manner. She was disappointed to find herself less of a social success than she had thought.

"Come and have a smoke, Lang," said Lord Misenden.

The other men followed them.

"She didn't hear," said Jan to Frances. "If Jack were in Africa, and anyone mentioned the word, miles off, I should hear it! Does she care?"

"She thinks she does."

"Did you see Mary smiling at her?"

"He smiles at everyone, doesn't he?" said Frances.

"Ye—es, more kindly at some than others. Frances, may I say something? No—I won't! Jack says I must learn to be discreet. Can you guess what I was going to say?"

"Impossible!"

"Secrets?" said Violet, joining them. Jan made room on the sofa. She patted it, and Violet sat down.

"No," said Jan. "We were discussing things in general, smiles in particular. Frances, I tell her, must wear rose colour."

"Doesn't she want to?"

"Oh, she's quite amenable! I can't get her very interested. I tell her it is a woman's duty to make the most of herself."

"Yes, of course."

"For you it must be difficult."

Violet smiled and said she didn't know.

"You do," said Jan. "You know you are absolutely lovely and that it would be impossible for you to look anything else! Now, tell me about your husband—I adore romance!"

"I don't know what to say."

"Is he dark?"

"Not very."

"Well, middling then—neither dark nor fair; that's what I like. His eyes?"

"Hazel."

"Hazel! that's a sort of greeny grey. I know the kind—go on."

"I don't know what to say."

"Is he fat or short, or tall or thin?"

"He's tremendously tall."

"How glorious!" said Jan, settling down into the sofa cushions. "Oh, Frances, I adore this—make me feel creepy and sympathetic—do! Jack isn't beautiful—forgive me, Frances!"

"He's six foot three," said Violet.

"I hope the girls won't be too tall," said Jan fervently.

"What girls?" said Violet.

"Yours."

"Oh!"

"Don't you like talking about them?"

"Jan!" said Frances, "you are too absurd! Take Violet to her room!"

"Won't you come too?" said Violet. She dreaded an interview alone with Jan. Was she never to be safe from this intensely domestic curiosity? The prospect of enormous girls depressed her.

CHAPTER XX

By way of economising, the Missendens let their own place which had thirty bedrooms, and took someone else's that had twenty-six. It was clearly the save of one housemaid. Lady Missenden was triumphant, and Lord Missenden thought her a wonderful woman.

When the Missendens came to settle at Delmore the housekeeper put it respectfully to her ladyship that fewer bathrooms meant more hot water to carry ! So her ladyship reluctantly added the housemaid deducted, and said there were still the dining-room chairs to fall back upon. With shabby furniture, less is expected of one—though she was bound to admit that sitting on shabby chairs did not make people any the less hungry, neither did it excuse an indifferent chef. But still, morally, they were economising, since they thought they were.

People in narrower walks of life have economised in a similar manner by using a cheaper soap than the one to which they have been accustomed. In a very short time they find it necessary to buy something to soften the hands that the inferior soap have rendered rough. But the fact remains they are using cheaper soap !

Lady Missenden and Violet were sitting in the boudoir at Delmore. Lady Missenden was working. Violet was holding a magazine upside-down, while she leisurely turned its pages.

"Tell me, dear," said Lady Missenden, "about your mother. Nothing upsets her ?"

Violet said, "Nothing."

Lady Missenden proceeded in her calm, comfortable and graceful manner, to thread her needle with wool. Her work was engrossing, her conversation was fragmentary; but it interested Violet enormously, as did everything about the Missendens.

"Your mother must be a wonderful manager."

"I think she must be," said Violet.

"Tell me; in what way?"

"I don't really know."

"I like to hear how people manage."

"It's so difficult to say, because it's, of course, nothing like this."

"Like what?" said Lady Missenden. "Shall I make the middle of this carnation dark—quite dark—or this shade?"

Violet leant forward to study the middle of the carnation; put her head on one side, and said she thought not the darkest shade.

"Not the darkest?" said Lady Missenden, as she pulled out a strand of the darkest shade and began to work it in.

"Now about board wages? I know nothing about them. Our dear old housekeeper died not long ago. She was with Missenden when I married—quite one of the family. In fact, a few years ago, when we had new stair-carpets at Missenden, she said, 'We've had red carpets ever since we've been married.'"

"Were the new ones red?" said Violet.

"No, green," said Lady Missenden. "Yes, board wages?"

"Board wages?" said Violet. "I don't think they have any."

"But when they go away, or your mother goes away?"

"They—the servants never go away."

"Holidays?"

"They never have any. Perhaps the new housemaid will."

"Never go away? I think it looks quite nice dark. Now tell me why they don't go away?"

"They generally have their relations to stay with them."

Lady Missenden was really interested. She dropped her work, and clasping her beautiful hands together, leant forward and gazed with deepest interest at Violet.

"Their relations—to stay? Dear, this is most interesting. Who stays with who? Doesn't it make jealousies? Now the housekeeper; who stays with her? And how do you put them up?"

"We have more room than you would think. The cook sleeps with the coachman, so that——"

"My dear child!"

"I mean they're married, of course," said Violet blushing. "They have a cottage, almost in the garden. And there's no housekeeper."

"Who does the cook have to stay with her?"

"Her son very often."

"What does the son do?"

"He's in a firm of electricians."

"Then the nurse and the maid; who do they have to stay?"

"Their sisters and their nephews and nieces."

"The footmen?"

"There is only one; he's an orphan."

"That seems very hard. Is he the only one who has no one to stay?"

Violet thought Lady Missenden was laughing at her, but she was wrong.

Lady Missenden was immensely interested. She was prepared to take up the case of the lonely footman ; to start a guild to protect him, of which she was prepared to be vice-president.

Violet said he was quite happy, and the cook was very fond of him.

"And the others all have their friends to stay ?"

"Yes, if they're not well and want a change."

"Forgive me, dear—if *they* are not well—the servants or the friends ?"

"The friends," said Violet.

"Your mother must be a very remarkable woman. She was as a girl. No one ever saw her put out, or—she seemed to be above everything mean and petty !"

"She is still."

"I must see much of her. She would do Missenden so much good. A quiet, calm influence, at the same time beautiful. It is so difficult to find a beauty that is not disquieting. She won't talk to him about religion, will she ? Because, though he has very, very deep feelings, he doesn't like anyone to try to get to the bottom of them. He has never got to the bottom of them himself."

"Mother never would," said Violet. "You would never know she——"

"That's perfect," said Lady Missenden, returning to her wools. "Missenden likes that. He likes a woman to be good, but he doesn't like her to appear so. You understand what I mean ?"

Violet wasn't sure. She thought it only loyal to her mother to say that he would, of course, know her mother was good, just by look——

"Of course, he wouldn't mind that, because there's always the possibility. You don't know our Tommy, do you ?"

Violet said, hardly. She had seen him at Lochewen.

His mother proceeded, as she worked in the carnation, to talk gently of Tommy; and as she rambled on describing him from the day of his birth, taking him kindly and sympathetically through his school days, Violet felt how interesting it would be to have a Tommy. She pictured herself at Lord's watching her Tommy, just as Lady Missenden described herself watching hers. She must look such a cool and distinguished mother. A mother, at Lord's, can look so hot.

"Tommy was a very interesting little boy, and I thought clever. He has not quite fulfilled all my expectations. His tutors always said he would surprise us, that he would mature very late. That, I find, they tell so many parents. When he was quite small I was reading to him—it comes in the Psalms, I think—'Stretch out Thy right hand and deliver us.' Tommy said 'He couldn't.' And I said he mustn't say that, that God could do everything! 'He couldn't do that—not stretch out His right hand,' persisted Tommy. And I said, 'Tommy, you mustn't say that!'

" 'Well, mother,' he said, 'He couldn't stretch out His right hand, because the Son of Man was sitting on it!'

"I was puzzled; I didn't know what to do. I sent for his father, but he was out! What does your mother do in a case like that? Darling Jan must have said delightful things too, but we never enjoyed her. When she came we looked upon her as an intruder. She separated us for a time, and that we resented. How did your mother manage with so many?"

Violet didn't know.

"It is so difficult to be both a mother and a wife. I realise it now, and am so looking forward to her dear baby. Frances is delightful, isn't she? Jan hopes the baby may be like her."

"Or like you," ventured Violet.

"No, I think not. Jan and I have discussed it. Frances has a far finer character than I have. What I am Missenden has made me. If I hadn't married such a wonderful man I shouldn't have trusted myself a word. Now Frances is so wonderfully strong and splendid, morally. It gives a baby such a start in life, a character like that. I am quite determined, if it is a girl, it must be like Frances."

Violet wondered what effect the strongest determination on the part of Lady Missenden would have on the character of the baby. She ventured to wonder if it could have any effect, and Lady Missenden asked her if she didn't believe in mental suggestion, and Violet said she hadn't studied the subject.

Lady Missenden wondered if there was any subject Violet had studied.

"What do you think of Mary Stuart?" she asked.

Violet very naturally said she thought as everyone else did.

"Yes, and I am afraid Frances thinks the same. The question is, does he care for her?"

"Mrs. Grieve?" said Violet.

"Elsie Grieve? You don't think that——"

Lady Missenden dropped her work; again she leant forward; again she gazed at Violet, and Violet regretted her indiscretion.

"Don't say that I said."

"What did you say, dear? But you really think that? I should be grieved, very grieved."

"Please don't say anything!"

"No, no," said Lady Missenden, "but it's so hopeless!"

"He won't die!"

"Who, Henry Grieve? Of course not. It's only in novels that sort of man dies. But Elsie can't——"

"I don't suppose she does; I only thought——"

"I suspected it, of course; but she looks so calm, so quiet."

Violet felt she had a chance here. Mentally she clutched at something—an elusive thought—what was it? It came to her just in time.

"Smouldering in the hearts of the quietest little women," she said, "there are fires that no one suspects. They take them to Harrod's with them every morning"—she hesitated; it didn't sound quite right—"they smoulder night and day—in the cradles of their children"—Violet paused; it was gone!

Lady Missenden's beautiful eyes widened with horror, "My child," she said, "I was afraid of it; you must stamp on that fire—put it out once and for all. You owe it to your husband—to stamp it out—and you can! At your age it can hardly have caught fire. It is disloyal to him to allow it to smoulder. Your tears in his absence should have put it out. If it would be any comfort or consolation to confide in me, tell me everything! I am perfectly safe. Is it anyone in this house? Tell me, my child."

"It's not in me—the fire," said Violet. "Aunt Georgina said it."

"Ah, that sounds more natural; no one knows what fires may be in her dear old sinner! Talking of fires, I do hope they will enforce this law about fireguards. So many women lose their children

through having no fireguards. I tell Missenden what's the use of making the law if they don't give the money to buy fireguards? At Missenden we have given away dozens. Every cottage has one."

"Even where there are no children?" said Violet.

Lady Missenden looked quite startled. It was a practical side to the question she had never thought of.

"Everyone may have children—no one can tell," she said, threading her needle. "Every house——"

"I meant old maids," said Violet.

"Even old maids may have children," said Lady Missenden, bending her head low over her work, scrutinizing the carnation she had finished—"to stay with them," she added.

"But they wouldn't be liable, would they?" said Violet.

"To what, dear?"

"Legally liable if the children got burnt, I meant."

Lady Missenden didn't answer. She worked very industriously for a while and then said, "I suppose they stay years?"

"Who?" said Violet.

"Your mother's servants?"

"Oh, yes," said Violet, grateful for a lead. "Ferney twenty-five years, and Nannie twenty-five, and Cherry twenty-three, and Sharp——"

"Wouldn't you like to go out, dear?" said Lady Missenden, waving to Laura Listowen through the window. Violet felt rebuffed.

Lady Missenden was so deeply engrossed in her work that the door opened and shut without her hearing it. Sir Everard sat down quite close to her, before she knew anyone was in the room. Any other

woman might have jumped. Lady Missenden never jumped.

"It's you, is it?" she said. "Should you put dark here?"—she indicated, with the point of her needle, the petal of a flower and Sir Everard said—"Light."

"D'you think so?" she said, putting her head on one side.

He thought so.

"You won't mind if I do it dark?"

He said "Not in the least."

She did it light, and he smiled.

"Tell me," she said, "about Violet Egerton."

"She's not quite so stupid as she seems—but very nearly."

"There must be something in the child."

Sir Everard proceeded to say shortly and concisely what he had found in her. He touched gently on her stupidity; dwelt tenderly on her simplicity; and warming to the subject, lingered lover-like on her beauty. Of the latter he had a very keen appreciation, and was glad to find that Lady Missenden had it too; that she saw the points he saw, and admired those he most admired. She generously admitted that beauty as rare as that covered a multitude of social sins—sins that were after all sins of omission only. He confided his hopes to Lady Missenden of making Violet something really remarkable, and she shook her head and said, that he would never do.

"Never?"

"Never!"

"She is immensely admired by men."

"That's not enough! For some extraordinary reason you will find women won't be jealous of her."

"Which means she lacks something?"

"The something certainly that makes a great beauty. Personally, I think it is a great pity to try and make her anything than what she is—a very beautiful and not much more than ordinarily stupid young woman. She will come out enormously. At thirty she will surprise you. Her character will be quite firm enough for all practical purposes. She will bully her gardener quite admirably, and will, perhaps, remember the Latin names of most of the flowers. The gardener will think so, at all events.

"She will be an excellent mother. The children will be exquisitely clean when they ought to be, and delightfully dirty when they may be; which distinction must be clearly defined in the mind of a real mother. She is the kind of woman who must have a baby. Her love for her husband won't be engrossing. He will be the father of her children, nothing more. From what I hear he is delightful and very clever. He is probably the kind of man who will insist on his wife doing her hair in some strangely simple way, because other women's beauty can't stand the test. He will take an enormous pride in her beauty. He will put her on a pedestal. He will mistake stupidity for femininity—is there such a word?"

"You astonish me," said Sir Everard. "I cannot imagine Mrs. Egerton doing her hair differently for any man."

"You are wrong; for the one man who can make her she will. She will be shielded from all knowledge of evil, and she will keep her expression of divine innocence; but she won't gain that of divine compassion, which is to me the most beautiful expression in the world and the only one that makes woman quite perfectly beautiful."

"The existence of evil is justified if it has the power to do that," murmured Sir Everard.

"Should one woman improve her looks at the expense of another's morals?" asked Lady Missenden.

"If a sin committed by one is a chance given to another to forgive, surely——"

"It is a dangerous creed!"

"It was yours, not mine. A sin to be a sin must wrong another, I take it."

"It may only do harm to oneself."

"One may not sin against one's better self? Why not? Have I a better self?"

"I should say so," said Lady Missenden gently.

"Is my everyday self so bad?"

"Not so bad, perhaps, as—apart from your work—useless."

"Useless?" said Sir Everard. "Does a day ever pass that I don't help someone in the choice of a better chef, a smarter frock? Don't I know the names of every eligible young man in the United Kingdom; and his past history, which in those cases where his income is sufficiently large is readily forgiven? Don't a dozen hostesses look to me for help and succour? Is there——"

"A life better worth living? I should say so. Why don't you marry?"

"My dear lady, your beautiful mind runs on matrimony. Because you turned up trumps you think every hand a good one. Because you are happy, why should I be happy? Because you found a Missenden, why should I find a——"

"Do you ever think of what it would be to have a home?"

"I have a home. My drawing-room has green

glacé silk curtains—just that shade of green that fills the hearts of some women with pain and anguish—they can better bear the rose-coloured ones in the dining-room. Anyone can have rose-colour, the most unaspiring, but that shade of green! Could any home be more feminine? My women friends dread bringing their husbands to dinner. It makes them so discontented!”

“There is no nursery!”

“My dear lady! I should like to see your face if there were! Where would the divine compassion be then, poor thing? That particular sin, which would involve a nursery, I should have committed in vain. You would not take the chance offered of showing forgiveness. The top windows in my house have bars. I cannot get nearer to a nursery than that.”

“Tell me,” said Lady Missenden, “were you always so foolish—socially? Were you always a thing of—thistledown?”

“Would you like to know?”

Lady Missenden nodded.

Everard Lang leant forward, and picking up a skein of wool began to pull out the threads one by one.

“Well, years ago the thistledown floated out to a dinner. The thistledown was fresh and young and intact. No one had blown bits of it away. No one had passed the time of day at its expense! Next to it at dinner sat another bit of thistledown—I have since suspected bits blown away from the other side; the side next to me was——”

“Don’t be foolish! You sat next a girl at dinner?”

“I sat next a girl at dinner. I realize that now. I then thought, of course, she was an angel.”

“What was she like?”

“Like nothing I have ever seen.”

Lady Missenden nodded. "Of course, but really?"

"That's not sympathetic. It's quite true; I had never seen anything like her."

"Describe her!"

"The length of her eye-lashes! Longer than any young man should——"

"Do be serious."

"If you knew how serious I am!"

"Please go on seriously!"

"Seriously? She was lovely, or I thought her so! She was full of life, laughter, and love. Her eyes challenged mine to prove my world a better one than hers. Which led us to compare our two worlds. We found them strangely alike. By the end of dinner we found they contained but two people, one in each. So we both—of that I am sure—determined to amalgamate our two worlds. Having done that, they straightway became one heaven!"

"At the end of dinner the man on her other side, a dull, heavy fellow, with aggressive shirt studs, said, 'You haven't spoken a word to me.'

"She should have turned to him at the 'noisettes de mouton.'—did they exist then? Well, the 'filet de bœuf' undoubtedly did, but she had nothing left but a peach-stone to play with. She made a charming little face, and turned to the man on the other side, and left me alone in my world."

"Heaven," corrected Lady Missenden.

"No; it had become a world again."

"And——"

"And—she married the man on the other side—it's a way women have!"

"Not immediately?"

"Not immediately. We lived, just we two, in our heaven for the delirious space of six weeks."

"How cruel of her!" said Lady Missenden. "How can such things be allowed!"

"To give your face that look of divine compassion, of course!"

"Don't!"

"Well, dear lady, that's the story more or less. I did once prove myself capable of loving——"

"And now you philander! Having known real love, isn't it treachery to the best in you?"

"I philander?"

"Yes, you! What about Violet Egerton?"

"A beautiful child, that is all—a beautiful bit of thistledown ready to be blown."

"And what happened to the woman who married the man on the other side? Do I know her?"

"No; she pays that price!"

Lady Missenden didn't understand, so she asked him if he would put light here?

He wasn't in the least interested in the work, but Lady Missenden amused him mildly. "I think," she said, "I can trace Violet Egerton's simplicity to her home. She has been telling me about their servants."

"Talking 'servants' to you!" said Sir Everard, feigning horror.

"No, not in that sense. I was very much interested. They stay years, never have holidays, and have their friends to stay with them."

"Do the friends stay years? It sounds amazing. They must have plenty of room."

"The coachman sleeps," said Lady Missenden—she hesitated—"outside."

"Naturally," said Sir Everard.

"Naturally," said Lady Missenden. "Would you put pink here?"

"I should put red."

"I think it's an excellent plan. I must find out from my maid if there is anyone she would like to have to stay. It would be such a good way of amusing them—the servants."

Sir Everard said he could imagine most amusing possibilities.

Lady Missenden hastened to say she meant women friends. And Sir Everard said he supposed she meant for the women servants !

Whereupon she asked if she had said men ! He assured her she hadn't.

"I am so engrossed," she said. "Would you put light here !"

CHAPTER XXI

It was while Violet was at the Missendens that it was suggested to her that she should take a flat in Town for the winter. The country was dull for one so young and, it was inferred, so beautiful. Of course, there *were* beautiful women buried alive in the country; but in most cases they had lived their lives. That was Laura's theory. They must have seen something of a world they were willing to renounce. She urged that to repent you must first sin.

Some one suggested that there was no particular sin in taking a flat. Laura admitted that, and said she was talking generally. It was generally conceded that it would be delightful for Violet to be within easy reach of the Colonial Office; to hear news of Dick when it arrived.

Besides, to make love to the "powers that be" might be of inestimable advantage to him.

One of the "powers to be" put in a plea. There was so much he wanted to show her in London. So much for her to see and to hear. He wanted to be the one to see her awakening to the beauties of pictures and music.

She pleaded an absolute ignorance of the beauties of Wagner. He said how honest of her to admit it! Honest? She wanted to know why? Ought she to care for him?

There was no ought about it; in many ways it was better that she shouldn't. About that Lady Blatherwake had something to say later.

Violet was puzzled ; she had always thought herself musical. She had known when the village choir sang out of tune, and now she was told she didn't know what music meant. She had always loved pictures, yet she now found there was no beauty in those she most admired.

How could a sense of beauty be possessed by only those few people who belonged to a particularly small portion of London society ? Everard Lang was longing to teach Violet. Her mother was determined he shouldn't. But Violet was very willing to learn, and was distressed at her mother's opposition. She had no idea how strong it was ; neither did she know that her mother had written the following letter to Lady Blatherwake :—

“ DEAR GEORGINA,

“ As a woman of the world—though of your doing a retired one—will you help me ? I am in a difficulty about Violet. It is probably my own fault ! A mother more worldly would have better equipped her daughter to meet those difficulties which may arise in the lives of most young married women, which must arise in the life of one left without a husband to look after her. It seems to me that Violet is drifting into a set that is strange and uncongenial to me. I understand neither their morals nor their motives. I hate the terms of endearment the women use to one another. Violet says it is smart. I hate smartness then !

“ Violet is a child. It is only natural, I suppose, that she is pleased at the admiration she excites. She has not the discrimination to dislike the kind of woman I should wish her to dislike.

“ These women are urging her to take a flat in

Town, and I don't wish it. There is the case in a nutshell. The alternative is that she should stay with the Raleighs. I don't wish her to do that either. Mrs. Raleigh is very beautiful. She lives for admiration; she thirsts for it! She was not content till she won mine. I made a poor struggle! She demanded George's, which was funny. I should like Violet to see as much as possible of Frances Bailey; she is quite content to see very little. And that delicious Jan! There is no news of Dick, and there seems to be no chance of news. If we had known of this expedition sooner we could have put off the marriage. I should then have kept my child. Do help me, Georgina!—with your advice, I mean! Sir Everard is in constant communication with Violet about Dick, in spite of there being no news!"

Lady Blatherwake wrote the following letter to Mrs. Charlton:—

"DEAR HELEN,

"I got my jewels out of the bank to-day. Good, solid, heavy, respectable jewels. Fenders for my head—saucepan lids to be disposed about the rest of my person. How many people will beg me to have them reset by Cartier? Wait and see!

"I have given orders for the Grosvenor Square house to be opened. How surprised the red satin sofas will be to see the daylight! Not more than I! This is my answer to your letter—

"Send Violet to me. I shall love having her. It will amuse me. And I promise you it shall do her no harm.

"If she wishes to see something of the wickedness of the world, who can show it her better than I can?

I have plumbed its depths and found it fairly sound at bottom. As she is married I can tell her what stories I like. I make that stipulation!

"Leave Lang to me. My dear Helen, if you hadn't turned down the brim of that hat I sent you from Paris, and made it into one of your everlasting mushrooms, you wouldn't have found yourself in a difficulty of this kind!

"Blanchaille is out of his mind with joy! Never has mortal chef—immortal chef, I should say—borne banishment as he has. I believe he imagines I am going to marry again, or entertain Royalty. Parkin says the footmen must be powdered. He hasn't the stomach for it; but I suppose I shall have to give in! If dear Blatherwake could see me! Henrietta says he can! It is surprising how much that woman knows about the next world, and how little she knows about this one. That's why, perhaps."

CHAPTER XXII

SIR EVERARD was in his most official mood—discreet, detached, aloof. He helped himself to a poached quail as if he were approaching a difficult matter, one admitting of misconstruction.

He refused to commit himself to the woman on his left; he had no private opinion of the cleverness of the Prime Minister to give away. Neither would he say what he thought of the political situation—beyond that it amused him.

"Yes, amuse," he reiterated, in answer to the question of a pretty bride of a few weeks' standing. She couldn't see anything amusing in the situation.

"Not of me monopolizing you when your husband is looking daggers at me? How cruel women are!"

"But the German question?"

Someone had told her husband that someone, who really knew, had told him that they would undoubtedly land at—Kingussie!

Sir Everard said it would tax Kingussie to find enough breakfast baskets.

Whereupon she asked him if he never took things seriously. And he said most seriously, when he wanted a breakfast basket!

"Then you don't believe in the danger?"

He said there were greater dangers nearer at hand. He sighed. She was hardly worth the trouble of talking to. Her prettiness was a matter of a year or two, if that!

A look from her husband sent the bride's eyes

down and her colour up. Of course, she ought not to try to pick the brains of a man like Sir Everard; although it had been in order to meet men like him that she had married a dull husband. She was longing to ask Sir Everard to call; but she hardly dared. He might have asked permission to do so; if she had not worn a ring on her middle finger—a thing he detested—he might!

On his other side sat Laura Listowen. He turned to her with relief. She had no apprehensions of the Germans or anyone else, and she invariably amused him.

They had been talking a few minutes when she said in an undertone, a very unusual thing in Laura, "Look to the left—quick!"

He looked quickly. He withdrew his gaze only when the object of his interest had passed out of sight. He turned to follow, with his eyes, as long as possible, that very beautiful object.

It was Violet Egerton. She was learning rapidly. She walked like a woman who knows she is beautiful without setting great store by it. She accepted admiration without challenging it.

"Don't look so long, Greedy!" said Laura. "How the child comes on! Can Dicky afford it?"

He didn't answer.

"Missenden is so proud of her."

"Missenden?"

"Yes; he's her social god-father. His god-parental interest is so pretty. I wonder if he has been able to convince her that there lies no sin in dining at a restaurant—or supping either!"

Everard Lang didn't answer. Laura thought how dull he was. He thought how tiresome she had grown!

Their hostess was miserable. Her supper party had not been a success. It was too tiresome. Sir Everard could be amusing if he chose. The bride she had taken on chance—she dressed well—and Laura on sufferance.

When Lang got home, he wrote and asked Violet to allow him to take her somewhere—pictures—a concert—play—anything. What would she like? He had seen her at the Ritz. He had been with such a dull party. Why had she been so proud—so distant?

Lady Blatherwake and Violet drove home from the Ritz in silence. The older woman because she was sleepy; the younger because she was excited, and had a great deal to think about.

She was tasting for the first time in her life the sweets of luxurious ease. It was not the best school for her; but her aunt was a very rich woman, and couldn't, for the sake of her niece's morals, have motors with bad engines, or live in a small house with a few servants. The old lady was as quick to see the change in Violet as Violet was to feel it in herself. She had naturally seen luxury at the Raleighs, and in a lesser degree at the Missendens. But here it, in a sense, belonged to her; she was part of it. She had only to ring the bell to have a motor round in a few moments. Parkin encouraged her.

The old lady liked the way in which Violet stepped out of the motor. She chuckled as she followed her into the boudoir, and watched her, with appreciation, slip out of her cloak.

Every movement was graceful. Where had the child got it from? Violet stood looking at her radiant reflection in the mirror over the mantelpiece, as any other beauty might have done.

"Humph!" said Lady Blatherwake. "You are doing what I never did!"

"What was that?"

"Admiring your own beauty!"

Violet laughed. "I owe it to you!"

"Not to me, my dear! To God, added to the fact that when two people like your father and mother marry, the chances are in your favour. With all her beauty your mother was kind and generous. I didn't find that with most beauties."

"May I?" said Violet, taking a cigarette and tapping it gently on the back of her hand.

"You smoke, do you? Well, I shouldn't if I were you!"

"Why?"

"Because I shouldn't; that's reason enough. I should leave something of your own self for Dick to come back to!"

"Will he find me changed?"

"I wonder! You wore blacked boots in the afternoon, with a muslin dress, when he went away, didn't you?"

"Did I? How awful! Dick would never know, that's the worst——"

"Don't you worry about Dick. He's a man—none of your effeminate creatures—a real man!"

Lady Blatherwake sat down in a chair, and Violet sank into another. The elder woman could no longer sink, with grace. She sat plumb down. "Now, my child, I am going to talk to you. Many people would talk at you and would never let you know it. I am going to talk to you as I have never talked to anyone. I am going to tell you what I have never told anyone except Blatherwake. Don't you imagine, my young woman, that you beautiful women have the

monopoly of happiness, or emotion, or love. I loved Blatherwake as it will never be your lot to love anyone. Mind that! It's the truth. And he loved me!"

Violet smiled. She wondered what Valde would do under the circumstances. She could only smile.

Violet lay back in her chair and smiled up at her aunt, perched above her.

"Heavens, how beautiful!" thought the old lady. "What's the good of saying anything; the first man she meets, and my counsels go to the wind!"

She said nothing for a moment, but looked at the girl's face, with its wonderful eyes, its half parted lips, its exquisite colouring, vivid yet delicate! The husband of such a creature had no right to be in Africa.

"As a lesson take it or leave it! To begin with, I was the plain wife of a very good-looking man. It's a difficult position. Other women thought me fair game—beautiful women. They were sorry for me—their sympathy took a strange form; they were sorer for Blatherwake. They said he was so good to me!

"I laughed at them in my sleeve. He laughed too. That they never guessed—beautiful idiots most of them.

"The more he laughed the better pleased I was! I worshipped him; he was absurdly fond of me. I made him laugh—perhaps that was why!

"Then he admired my hair. It was the only thing he could admire, that and my skin. Well, that's neither here nor there; certainly not here."

She touched her cheek and laughed, then leant over and stroked Violet's. "It was a great sorrow to me that we had no children. Stupid idiots said it would

have drawn us together. Nothing could have made our happiness more complete in that way; but I wanted a son, naturally. I like them. I wanted Blatherwake to have a son. I wanted him to have everything in the world. He should have had one at thirty, just as naturally as he had measles at nine; his first gun at ten; his hunters at eleven; his mumps at twelve; and his chicken-pox and measles in their order. It worried me dreadfully! If he hadn't had measles it wasn't my fault! He laughed and I imagined he laughed to make me think he didn't mind!

"Well, I was young and idiotic, and many other things, and I wrote him a letter it took me days to compose. I wrote suggesting I was quite willing, if there was no other way out of the difficulty, to commit one particular sin, if it was the only way possible for him to get a divorce. I hated it; but if it had to be proved, and without proving it no divorce was possible, I would do it.

"Then he could marry again. I told him it was impossible for me to commit suicide, because I should be so frightfully anxious to see how he got on—to see if he was happy! Well, I left that letter on his dressing-table, and I went out into the garden and wandered about, miserable and horribly anxious. It was a summer's night; I was shivering. I waited under the trees. I thought I could better hear, in the dark, what he had to say. I daresay you are laughing—that it sounds funny to you. Aunt Georgina waiting, miserable and shivering in the dark! I wasn't fat then; I was very slight, very young, desperately in love with my husband! Desperately in earnest! Laugh if you like—if you haven't enough imagination to pity that child!"

"And what happened?"

"Ah!" said Lady Blatherwake, "you want to know too much! The immediate outcome of the interview, as they would say in books——"

"Yes!" said Violet eagerly.

"Was that," said Lady Blatherwake slowly, "we had the detestable monkey-trees cut down the next day! I hate the things!"

"Aunt Georgina, I'm so sorry," said Violet.

"Are you? I'm not. I can't imagine how Blatherwake's father could have planted them."

"No, about the other thing!"

"My child, I'm not telling you all this to amuse you, although it made Blatherwake laugh; but because I want you to understand that I was ready to do in grim earnest, for my husband, what your friends are ready to do for fun. It's easy enough for a woman to find a lover. It's not so easy for the same woman to keep her husband's love. The dullest creature, the stupidest, can get some man to carry on with her so long as she is married. The same woman, unmarried, no one would look at. To take what is someone else's seems to attract some men. My child, there's nothing in this world that can come up to the happiness of the moment when you meet your Dick and can look into his eyes unashamed, without a shadow of doubt between you! There can be nothing so like hell if you can't! There; I've done! You've seen a side of old Lady Wideawake that perhaps no one has ever seen. You won't see it again—girls bore me as a rule—I shall swear if I can't find my handkerchief. Good-night!"

The following day Violet wrote three letters to Dick, went to the British Museum, and tore up a note of Sir Everard's unanswered.

CHAPTER XXIII

LADY BLATHERWAKE watched Violet's correspondence with amused interest. She quickly grew accustomed to and liked to see the small, graceful head bent over the writing-table, and learned to know by the scratching of the pen exactly to which of the two men she was writing. If the scratching was continuous, and the journeys from the ink-pot to the paper and back again very rapid, she guessed the girl was writing to Sir Everard. If the beautiful head remained long in one position, and that position an upward one with the eyes fixed on the ceiling, and the pen laboured slowly and fitfully over the paper, then she knew the girl was writing to Dick.

It was bad, and the old lady shook her head, honestly endeavouring to understand and not misjudge the child. Her natural impulse was to be wholesomely indignant, remembering her own married life and the letters she had written to her husband.

She knew in Violet's case the engagement had been a thing of a few weeks, a delirious experience; the married life, probably as delirious, had been even shorter, and then the lover and husband had disappeared out of the child's life.

Into it had come an older man, and probably, where women were concerned, a much wiser one. His first step had been to make Violet believe in herself, and to the man who does that for a woman she owes

something. It is as well to leave the debt unpaid. To repay makes the debt a heavier one on the other side. A debt that can never be repaid.

His second step had been to form a mutual admiration society of two. He understood, and profoundly admired her. She understood and was immeasurably grateful to him. She made a mistake—from his point of view—in conceding that.

No one understood either of them as they understood one another. Not even that nebulous husband far away. "Did he really exist?"

Sir Everard asked the question one morning when they were sitting in the Park. Violet, distressed, owned she found it difficult sometimes to realise.

"His existence?"

"Yes, in a way." Violet, blushing, hoped Sir Everard understood. Of course he understood.

He hinted vaguely at a past when he had been misunderstood; less vaguely at a future when she, perhaps, wouldn't have the courage to understand him; and definitely at a delightful present which was passing only too quickly. But it was pleasant to drift, even if one drifted too quickly; one could snatch at things as one passed; opportunities grew on the banks; they could be seized by those who were quick enough to grasp them; they could be held for a moment or two by those strong enough to leave go.

Violet didn't play up. She was no good at this kind of thing. She had made very little progress, and was inclined to take him seriously, which was the last thing in the world he wanted. He switched off to her goodness, a subject of which she never seemed to tire.

"It used to frighten me rather," he said. "I revered it as something new and wonderful; now

it seems sometimes to assume the proportions of an ogre. It stands at the gate of a fairyland. There is no sin in fairyland remember, only a little harmless oblivion. In this work-a-day world sin and happiness seem terms synonymous, which is the invention of the devil and a few old women. I wonder why we should listen to them ? ”

Violet didn't know ; she wasn't listening to him. He was struck by a look on her face ; it was strange to him and disturbingly beautiful. Her lips were half smiling ; her eyes, altogether smiling, followed something eagerly. She leant forward in her chair.

“ What is it ? ” he said.

A yard or two from Violet's chair stood, on one leg, a little boy. The other leg he swung backwards and forwards. He put his tongue in his cheek and looked sideways at Violet and smiled at her. He threw his ball in the air, and when he caught it turned to her for applause. He threw it again and caught it with one hand. He stood and looked at her. Then he began throwing it over his head and catching it behind his back. She said, “ How splendid,” and he laughed, and in laughing missed the ball.

“ I *can* do it,” he said, “ billions of times.”

“ You do it beautifully,” said Violet, holding out her hand.

“ I was showed how,” he said.

“ It must be very difficult,” she said.

“ It is awfully—it's difficulter—much than anything. Mr. Strong can do two balls ; at least he can sometimes. Nobody could always.”

“ It's the Lorton boy,” said Sir Everard in an undertone.

“ You know him ? ” said Violet eagerly.

“ You remember ? She ran away.”

"From him?" said Violet, in a voice hushed with horror.

"Well, from Lorton, I suppose."

Violet put out her hand and the boy came. He leant up against her, and putting his feet together, slid down till his body rested against hers. She put her arm round him. He leant more against her. Where her hand rested she felt his heart beating, just as Peter's beat.

"Have you been running?" she said.

"And jumping," he said. "I do all the time. I've got heaps of things at home—heaps."

Violet nodded, "Nice things?"

"Awfully, thanks!" He was twisting her bangle round and round, just as Peter did.

"You haven't got a brown pony, have you?"

"I *have*!" he said.

"Not a brown cart?"

"Yes, I have," he said excitedly.

"Not with red wheels?"

"Yes, I have. How did you ever know?"

"And brown harness?"

"Ye—es," he said mystified. "What else have I got?"

"You haven't got a whip?"

"Yes, I have, so there!"

"What a lucky boy!"

"It was my birthday a long time ago."

"How old are you going to be next birthday?"

"Six; I'm five now. Does it open?"—he alluded to a charm which hung on her bangle, "There's Tommy!"

Off he went. Violet followed him with her eyes till he was out of sight.

"What were you saying?" she said, turning to her companion.

"I haven't the remotest idea."

He was losing interest in her. The look on her face as she had talked to the child had been a revelation to him—pure maternalism.

"How did you know he had all those things?"

"Most children have."

"Lucky children!"

"Children whose parents are well enough off; I could see they were that."

"Poor little beggar!"

"Oh!" said Violet. "How could she?"

"Couldn't stand Lorton, I suppose."

"But——"

"Oh, it's wrong, of course; don't look at me like that! She found the fairyland dull!"

"What does that man talk about?" said Lady Blatherwake, as she bore Violet away.

"Queer things," said Violet.

"Like most men, I suppose," said her aunt.

"I wonder!" said Violet.

"That absurd General Fanshawe was telling me this morning that I am the only woman who really understands him; that my goodness frightens him."

"To you?—General Fanshawe?"

"To me—General Fanshawe—why not?"

"Oh, nothing," said Violet, shrugging her shoulders.

"D'you think he's too old to talk nonsense? No man is if he chooses to give his mind to it."

"If you don't mind, Aunt Georgina."

"You don't?"

"Of course not."

When Violet got home she went up to her room. She put her hands to her throat. The pain she had felt the day Dick went away was there again, like a tight band choking her. How could that boy's mother have left him ? She still felt his warm little body in her arms. She cried, and in crying forgot all about Everard Lang.

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CHAPTER XXIV

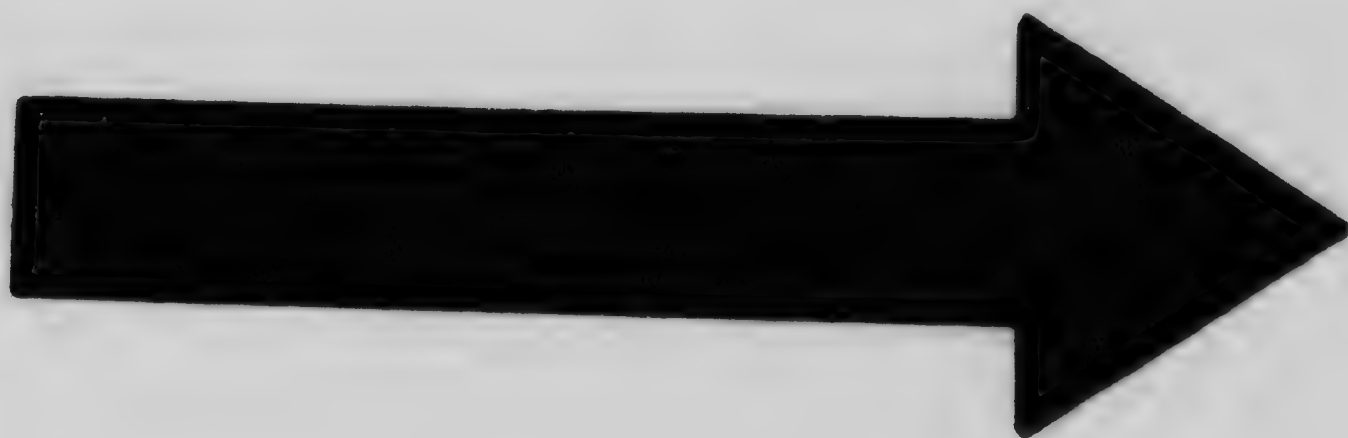
WHILE Violet was learning without much effort to appreciate Wagner and to see beauties in things she had never imagined beautiful, Jan was making more lovely each day the room with pink roses everywhere. There came a day when there was nothing left to do but wait. So she waited, as it is only given to women to wait.

Violet learned to say glibly enough that Wagner was "very jolly," and that she simply loved him. She would have found it more difficult to say how his music affected her. Lady Blatherwake said she found no difficulty whatever in expressing exactly how it affected her. "But then you're older!" said Violet.

"Old enough to know better, eh? Notwithstanding my age and experience, I own frankly it makes me long to go to the dogs! No married woman with her husband away has any right to go and hear Wagner. It should be prevented by law!"

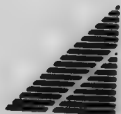
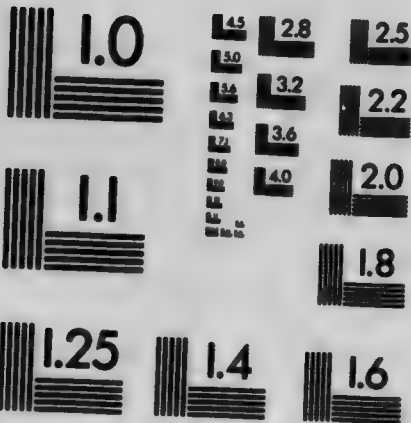
"Wouldn't that be difficult?" asked Violet, and her aunt laughed.

She asked Violet if she knew there was a brotherhood, the members of which took vows for ten years? After the ten years, if they chose they could go back into the world, mix with their friends, do and see what they liked with one exception. And that was that they mustn't hear a Wagner Opera! Did Violet



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know that ? And now she did know it, did she see the consummate sense of the man who framed that law ? In sympathy for the brother, something crept slowly down Violet's back. "A wise man that," said her aunt.

"If he wanted the brother back !" said Violet.

"He wouldn't have let him out if he hadn't been certain of getting him back. After ten years a man has no friends—the world is a lonely place—the niche he left is filled up. That brother, I take it, would be glad to creep back into the monk's hood."

"If he hadn't heard a Wagner Opera—I mean he might without knowing it !"

"My dear child, it's a mercy you have your face, for you certainly have no brains. Don't be angry !"

"I'm not ; I know you pride yourself on saying that sort of thing. I don't mind !"

"Heavens !" murmured the old lady. "What does a man like Lang see in the child ?"

Frances had left Chelsea and was staying with the Raleighs. She felt horribly anxious about Jan—horribly apprehensive.

There was something uncanny in Jan's happiness. She expected too much of the world. There must come a time——.

Frances hardly slept the whole of one night. Early next morning she went to Fräulein and told her she was going to Chelsea.

Fräulein cried, of course. The Missendens had promised to let Frances know at once. But they had begged her not to come too often. It might frighten Jan if she appeared anxious. So the whole of one day Frances had stayed away. At this hour of the morning she knew Jan would be in bed. Frances

would steal into the house, and no one would know but the servants.

From force of habit she put her key in the door and went in. She stood on the door-mat. Her heart thumped; the blood rushed to her temples. There was a deathly stillness in the house; and on the hall table strange hats. Had her premonition been right? Had her dear Jan's time come, and she had not been there, and could not have helped her if she had been.

She stole up to the drawing-room. Jan's writing-table looked untidy. It had not been dusted; that was evident. The pen was thrown down, as Jan might have left it. There was a letter on the blotter. It was addressed in Jan's writing to Frances.

She took it up and turned it over, afraid to open it. Why had it not been sent to her? When she gained the courage she opened it, and read:—

"Frances, do you remember when I told you there seemed to me to be a happiness greater than I could bear—a happiness beyond mortal endurance? It is coming to me—so I am told. I must do something. They say it won't be bad yet, so I'm going to write to you, who I love one of the best in the world. Mother sits and looks at me, trying to be cheerful, but her mouth wobbles, poor darling! "How we grow up, Frances. Yesterday I was a child—now!

"I feel I shall never be able to bear it—the happiness I mean. John talks of women by millions; dear thing, he doesn't understand. Millions of women may have been able to bear the touch of their babies' hands. I feel I shall never be able to do it and keep my reason! I shall go mad with joy! Nannie used to say if I made such a fuss over little things, what

was I going to do when big happiness came? What am I going to do?

"If I am right, and the happiness is more than I can bear, will you take care of my baby? Teach *him* to be like John. Teach *her* to be like you. Teach her that the world is a glorious place, but that its happiness doesn't end here. Teach her that her mother waits for her beyond the dreams of this world's happiness. Supposing by then she is an old, old woman, and I am what I am now!

"Teach *him* that the world wants brave men and strong men and good men—that the world is worse than it looks—it's safer with men to let them know the existence of evil. Teach them both to laugh and to cry when it helps others. Otherwise I don't recommend it! This may all be foolishness, but I have never been so foolish that you haven't understood me. If it is 'good-bye,' dear, darling Frances—comfort Jack. I have written to him. The letter is under the stockings, in my second long drawer, the chest of drawers next the window. I have hidden the letter carefully, in case he found it, and I didn't die after all! I have given myself away so hopelessly!

"There must be many young mothers waiting on the other side for their old, old children; isn't it puzzling? I love old people; but if it's a boy, don't let him have a beard!

"Frances, darling, the prayer-book is right. . . .
"Jan."

As Frances finished the letter a nurse, with a serious face, stood at the door, and, with an inclination of the head and a gesture, asked Frances to come upstairs.

"I think we must have telephoned to you just now—Miss Bailey?"

Frances nodded, and followed the nurse upstairs, into the dressing-room.

The baby groped in the air with its tiny hands, as babies do, feeling perhaps for the angels we cannot see.

Frances caught the tiny hands in hers and kissed them tenderly. Then she dried them, and cried again at their miraculous smallness.

"What a funny little thing," she said.

"You don't care for tiny babies?" said the nurse.

Frances turned indignantly. "Of course I do!" She hesitated, afraid to ask the question which stuck in her throat, "Will she live?"

"She's a beautiful child," said the nurse, non-committantly.

"I mean——" Frances couldn't say it.

"The mother? We never say die. I've seen worse cases—cases as bad, pull through. It's exhaustion; she's very plucky; she was up to the last. She wrote a letter till she got worse. Was it you she was asking for yesterday, perhaps?"

"Don't!" said Frances. "I only didn't come because——"

"She didn't fret; it seemed that she didn't want you to be disappointed."

"She has so much to live for!" said Frances.

"There's no rule in that." Then softening towards Frances she said, "We can't show all we feel; it wouldn't do. She's got the best advice."

"Is Lady Missenden here?"

"And his lordship. They're terribly upset." The nurse walked to the window. "She's such a baby herself."

Frances nodded. Her throat ached so she couldn't speak. She looked at the tiny atom of humanity, and the nurse turned and looked at Frances. She admired her immensely, and thought what a splendid mother she would be some day; then fell to wondering why she wasn't married.

The door opened, and in came Lady Missenden. "You, dear Frances; I wonder if you can comfort John!"

How could she?

"The baby's no comfort to him yet, he won't look at her! I want Missenden to come; he loves her!"

Lord Missenden came in. "Look!" whispered Lady Missenden. "You know the story of Bret Harte's you liked so much! The baby and the finger—she does just the same!"

Frances stole out of the room, down to the drawing-room. Like John, she found the baby no comfort—at present.

"Dear, dear Jan!" She picked up a bunch of keys lying on the table and pressed them to her lips. It was so like Jan; she always locked a drawer to show how business-like she was, and left the keys on the table to show how honest she found others.

The door opened slowly, and round it, on tip-toe, stole a man.

"You can't go upstairs," whispered Frances.

"No, Miss—only to this floor to-day—I understand."

Did he understand? Had he been through this? Did all men go through it? Was that what men meant when they said, "So and so has six children, poor devil?" Did they mean that he had gone

through agony like this—six times ! Did all men go through it ? If they did, why was there a man on earth who wasn't a good man ?

Could they pay this price and not be the better for it ever after ?

"I beg your pardon, Miss, if you will excuse the liberty, I hoped there would have been clocks to wind higher up !"

He pointed through at least two stories. "A cuckoo clock, Miss. There may be yet ; I hope so. I've been through it myself—at home."

Frances felt an unreasoning hatred against the smug little clock-winder. What right had he to have been through it ? By what right did he demand such sacrifice of a woman—she had in all probability been a most excellent parlourmaid. Was it in order to perpetuate his plain, smug, ugly little face ? Was it plain, smug, or ugly ? It looked very worn, troubled, and sympathetic.

A wave of pity swept over her. He had after all only obeyed the laws of nature, to which laws she owed her existence, he his.

"I hope," she said gently, "you may wind the clocks upstairs for many years to come."

"It's a five years' appointment, Miss, I understand."

Frances nodded ; the parlourmaid must find him tiresome !

"Please God I shall," he said. "Cuckoos have been known to last that time—with care."

The little man tip-toed away. Frances felt she had been unkind to him ; it was the last thing she wished to be that day to anyone. She looked over the banisters and said softly, "Here, did you marry Mrs. Fortescue's parlourmaid ?"

The little man beamed. "No, Miss! Mrs. Smith under-parlourmaid, thank you."

Frances went back to the drawing-room; she felt better.

The door opened; Lady Missenden came in. "De Frances!" she said.

The girl sat at the woman's feet. Together they kept vigil—in silence. Once only the elder woman spoke; she said, "It will be such an interest for Missenden!"

Once again the door opened; each time it opened it set Frances's heart thumping.

This time it was Lord Missenden.

"She's opened her eyes."

"Thank God," said his wife.

"They're blue," he said.

"Jan's?"

"No, the baby's."

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CHAPTER XXV

WHILE Lady Missenden and Frances waited silently in Jan's drawing-room, Violet walked in the park with Everard Lang. She talked gaily and happily. He listened. The fact that he knew she carried somewhere about her person an unopened letter from her husband was rather a matter of mixed satisfaction. He felt that in interesting her he had gone beyond his expectations. The danger of interesting her more than she interested him troubled him a little. He was not accustomed to be taken seriously.

However, that morning he was in the mood to think her almost brilliant. He was delighted to see her attract notice—the notice, too, of the right kind of people. Any pretty woman can compel the admiration of the multitude; but the most *blasé* turned to look at Violet. She walked well; every movement was graceful and distinguished. She didn't court attention by seeking to look different to other people, and was so well-dressed that no one but a woman possessed of an acute dress-sense, would have known what she wore.

She stood out from all the other women—a really beautiful woman among hundreds of pretty ones.

He admired the discretion with which she bowed and passed on. In singling him out from all other men she had touched him profoundly.

One woman more persistent than the others stopped them.

Lang held her capable of perpetrating an invitation to luncheon. He hoped Violet, in tackling the situation, would not disappoint him. The woman was one who was known never to take a refusal gracefully. She laid a restraining hand on Violet's arm. Sir Everard noticed with appreciation the delicacy of the lace on Violet's undersleeve; with disgust the tightness of the other woman's gloves. Why didn't women wear a larger size in gloves, or have smaller hands?

"I must tell you—though, of course, you know!—poor little Jan Bailey is dying—too sad! I hardly liked to come to the Park; but one can't do any good by staying at home! She's such a darling to die! A girl too! Not worth the sacrifice!"

Violet walked on; Sir Everard followed.

They said nothing. He, because he felt it to be tactful to say nothing; she, because she couldn't have said anything if she had tried. That Sir Everard did not guess. Hers, he thought, the intuition not to attempt to put into words what was beyond expression. If he had thought her stupid at times, he had never found her vapid. So far as he himself was concerned, he felt up against a terrific force—a relentless force. It was beyond his power to help. Poor little Jan must fight it out for herself.

In sympathy for a mutual sorrow, they walked on in silence. Suddenly upon the silence broke a sob. The boom of a cannon could not have surprised Sir Everard more. No raw recruit going into action for the first time could have felt a terror more paralysing. He could hardly believe his ears. No woman, he knew, could so far forget herself as to cry in public. The sobs became tempestuous. There was no damping the flood. As a child cries, she cried.

"Please!" he said, "don't cry!"

To be seen, by the whole world, with a woman in tears, was too horrible. "Please don't cry!" he repeated, knowing the vanity of such a request. He might as well politely request Niagara to stop falling. He had to decide, at once, whether it was better to remain in the crowded part of the Park and be seen by everybody, or to turn off to some more unfrequented part, and run the risk of being seen by a possible one. To be seen in a lonely part with a weeping woman, he decided, was the greater of two social evils.

Violet asked him through her sobs why women had children? He didn't know—except for reasons too obvious to explain—it wasn't within his province to know. He only knew that thousands had them, and hardly any died. He groped in the darkness of his mind for statistics. He couldn't find any. No women died, practically none! She had no right to subject him to such an ordeal. No woman with a social sense could have done it. He was immensely sorry for the Missendens—for Bailey—but he doubted that any of them were suffering a tenth of what he was suffering.

With the greatest relief he hailed a taxi at the Park gates and put Violet into it. He told the man to drive to Grosvenor Square. He lent Violet's handkerchief. Her interest in her was dead. She had submitted to an indignity unparalleled in his social experience.

As she sobbed "Good-bye," he didn't look at her. He didn't want to remember her as she looked then. It was absurd to say any woman looked pretty when she cried. "Horrible, horrible!"

He drove home. A Saturday wasted—and threw himself into his chair.

On reflection, he came to the conclusion that it showed she possessed more feeling than he had given her credit for; but socially? Hopeless!

After all, he wasn't sure the disillusionment hadn't come as a relief. She had never amused him. He knew many women who would be fascinating to a blind man. That Violet could never be.

During the time it took to traverse a tunnel in a railway train he had found himself losing interest in her. It was only on emerging from the tunnel, into the light, that he had found himself still an interested party.

He had been a slave all his life to a pretty face; now he was beginning to find that a profile could pall and a smile could satiate.

He took up the receiver of his telephone, and asked for a number in Mayfair. A few moments later he was talking to Valde Raleigh.

"How is she?" he said. "... Not really? ... I couldn't believe it; ... men, what? ... Selfish— oh! can't hear! ... You are talking so indistinctly. ... I might guess ... I'm so sorry. ... Don't! ... Why? ... because I've never seen you cry. ... Don't talk of crying. ... She'll get well ... because she must; nothing so happy could do anything else. ... So sorry. ... Will you ring me up later? ... I shan't go to the opera. ... No. ... Not at all, I don't feel like it. ... Take Barbara? That's different, certainly ... Nothing will induce her? ... Not a bit. It shows the child has feeling. ... All right!"

He put back the receiver and thought a while. Then he got out the map of Africa. He studied it, and began to make what looked like short cuts with the point of a dry pen. How uncomfortable it was being sorry for people! It could do no good.

Then he looked up Jan in the Peerage, and finding her twenty-one next birthday went on being very sorry all such time as luncheon was announced. He began to be sorry again about half-past three o'clock, and went on being sorry at intervals for two days.

Then walking in the Park he met a sight that cheered him. It was Frances! She was so splendidly healthy, so wholesome, so honest, so self-controlled, so altogether womanly. He wondered why he had never found the time to cultivate her.

"How is she?" he asked.

"Much better; I saw her to-day."

"Good!"

"She was a little distressed——."

Lang instantly looked sympathetic. He had a facial facility for that sort of thing, which was one of his most valuable social assets. He could look—in a shorter space of time—sorrowful than any other man of his age in London. He looked his best sympathetic.

"Because—don't look so sad," went on Frances, "they hadn't done the baby's hair right. Jan was showing them how she liked it done when I left."

"How does she want it done?"

"Are you interested in women even at that age?" laughed Frances.

"Even at that age; and what does enormously interest me is that they have hair to do at that age."

"Here is a young woman who will never fail to interest," said Frances, as she saw Barbara Raleigh walking towards them.

If anyone wishes to see Barbara, she is to be seen, between the hours of twelve and one walking in the Row. She is to be recognised for one thing by her great beauty. If there should chance to be other girls as beautiful, then look for the way she carries

her head—no other girl carries hers quite so proudly for the tilt of her chin ; for the fearless way she looks at everyone—which is distinct from boldness, and must by no means be confounded with it—unless, by chance, someone should look at her too earnestly. Then she will hold higher still her head ; will look proudly down her little nose, and speak sharply to the dog at her heel. He will raise, in gentle protest, a pair of eyes, rather blood-shot, but profoundly loving, and will wag his tail, promising never again to do what he had unwittingly done ! No admirer could do more, dog or otherwise.

Barbara has hidden away in her eyes and at the corners of her mouth a smile. If she meets a friend, it ripples all over her face, and she becomes, in a second, the Barbara of Lochewen. The hair Captain Burney found so distracting at Lochewen is stowed away somewhere. There are those who suspect masses of it hidden in the broad crown of her hat. If by none of the above-mentioned things can she be discovered, look for a *fräulein* and three dogs. No one else walks with just such a *fräulein* and three dogs.

When Barbara met Frances that morning the smile in her eyes broke into a thousand welcomes, and she slipped her arm through hers, ignoring Sir Everard.

"How is she ?" she whispered. "*Fräulein* is simply longing to see the baby. D'you suppose we should be allowed to ? I can't get her to pay the slightest attention to my lessons ; she never will till her eyes have seen the baby. The baby slips into everything. If I read in history about Henry the VIII. *Fräulein* sighs and says, 'De leetle darlin'. I must see it too, just to see that she doesn't exaggerate. Please arrange it, Frances !"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE immediate outcome of the scene in the Park was the following letter, written by Paul Charlton to his mother :—

“DARLING MOTHER,

“Something must be done. Violet was seen crying in the Park with Lang the other day.

“No woman—especially a very pretty one—has any right to be seen crying with a man who isn’t her husband.

“I’ve heard of it from several quarters. I know Violet has never had an unkind word said to her, and I’m not going to be the one to say it; but I shall go to Aunt Georgina. It is a step I feel bound to take. It’s not a pleasant one!

“Your loving son,
“PAUL.”

Paul wrote to aunt Georgina, and she read the letter over two or three times and laughed.

She liked Paul because she liked most boys—the stupid ones not less for their stupidity than the clever ones for their cleverness, the handsome ones for their looks, and “the boy” because he was a boy. They all amused her. Paul, because he was good-looking, rather stupid, and very much in earnest, and because he had appealed to her. That she liked. It was the surest way to her heart to let her think herself of some use. It is a form of vanity more harmless than some.

She would help Paul certainly. It fitted in with a plan she had had simmering in her brain some time.

She telephoned and asked Everard Lang to come and see her. That was the first thing she did. The next thing she did was to telephone and ask a friend to come half an hour later than the hour she had named to Lang. She knew, if he came at all, he would be punctual. The woman, she knew, would come on the wings of her curiosity, and before her time. She then told Parkin to let in no one but Sir Everard Lang and Mrs. Benyon.

Lady Blatherwake was sitting in the large drawing-room when Sir Everard was announced. He afterwards remembered, above everything else, a scent of lilies of the valley. The room seemed full of them. Until then he had loved them. He had carried his love for them so far as to like women who loved them, and nearly all women loved them.

The old lady was doing a jig-saw puzzle. It wasn't the height of the London season certainly; but to have time to do a jig-saw puzzle at all in London after Easter argued a certain lack of social success. So thought Everard Lang.

He wondered how he was to break to her gently that his interest in her niece was dead. She took things in such unexpected ways. A few months ago she would have been the first to say Violet was dull; now she was infatuated about the girl. The old lady had done wonders for her, no doubt. But she could do no more. Violet Egerton, in dressing beautifully, had reached her social limit. She was "au fond," domesticated. Lady Missenden was right. She was made to be the mother of exquisitely clean children. After all, it was something, and as such Sir Everard was perfectly willing to admire her.

"Ah, there you are!" said Lady Blatherwake, looking up. "It was you, wasn't it, who let me into the secret of the grain of the wood?"

He admitted it. That was nothing! Most men would do as much for any woman. To come in answer to a hurried summons was a great deal. It was gracious of a man in his position to answer such a summons at all. Did she realise how busy he was? Had she any idea that the affairs of the nation were in the balance while she jig-sawed? Was she one of those who saw only what he allowed them to call the frivolous side of his nature?

"Yes, it was you—the day you came over to Fairhome—July, wasn't it? You spoilt my game then; you've spoilt it now!"

She pushed back her chair from the table and rose. Everard Lang wished all stout women would remain seated.

"Now I mean to spoil yours," she said.

"My dear lady!" he said. "How have I had the misfortune to offend you?"

"To begin with, by calling me 'dear lady.' It's a modern mannerism I hate!"

"Is it so modern?"

"Perhaps not. It may be too old! Call me 'my good woman' if you must be familiar; I prefer it. I always go straight to the point! No beating about the bush! If I were a clever woman you would go away without having discovered—for all your wit—the reason of my displeasure, or the nature of my revenge. I am going to disclose both—to lay my cards face up on the table. You will have no use for diplomacy. Disabuse your mind of it. I want a clear head and a straightforward answer. You have forgotten how to give one! You must first of all

promise, from to-day, to cease making a fool of my niece ! ”

He would have put it differently, but it was exactly put his way, what he was most anxious to do. But in promising that he admitted himself guilty, he must be careful—in other words, diplomatic. He began gently and cautiously by saying he hardly understood what Lady Blatherwake meant. It was very much more likely that Mrs. Egerton, with her beauty and fascination, would make a fool of a man.

“She hasn’t the wit to do it. You are putting ideas into her head ! How you got them there, heaven knows ! You deserve credit for that ! She’s the simplest creature in the world. This veneer of fashion doesn’t become her in the least ! She won’t allow anything against you. She’s as obstinate as a mule. You are shocked at hearing that of a beautiful woman ! She’s not a woman, she’s a baby ! A sentimental baby ! Do you want her to be in love with you ? ”

Everard Lang showed plainly enough the horror he felt at such a suggestion. Besides putting everything else aside, it was an absolute impossibility ! He was at a loss to express himself !

“Then in heaven’s name, what *do* you want ? ” said Lady Blatherwake.

Sir Everard shrugged his shoulders. The old lady was impossible, hopelessly behind the times.

“She *is* in love with you, there ! You a man twice—three times her age ! She nineteen, and a baby at that ; her husband in Africa ! Who sent him there ? ”

“My dear Lady Blatherwake,” said Everard Lang in his quietest voice, his most charming manner, “it is too absurd ; you are labouring under some

very grave misapprehension—some strange delusion. The only possible way out of it is to laugh! It is so absurdly funny. I am, as you say, more than twice her age. I look upon her as a very beautiful child; it's so absurdly funny!"

"Funny? It's that, in a way, if I could make her see it! I've told her you're getting fat."

Sir Everard nodded. As a weapon in wartime Lady Blatherwake was justified in using the expression. "And old," went on the old lady, gathering impetus as she went. "I've raked up all I can about your past! Heaven knows I can't find as much as I hoped. What have you been doing all these years? I gave you credit for being much worse. You really did go to shoot chamois three years ago? Well! I told her of your scandalous behaviour with Mrs. Jay! All she said was that, as it was so long ago, and you are forty-five now, that you must have been a baby, and that Mrs. Jay ought to have been ashamed of herself. What have you to say?"

"That Mrs. Jay was——"

"I'm serious!"

"My dear lady, there's no need to tell me that; but I've never known you so serious that you haven't been amusing."

He was taking the old lady the wrong way. She was desperately in earnest.

"I say again that it's all absurd. Mrs. Egerton has been very kind to an old friend of her aunt's! That's all! Someone has been making fun of you, and very unkindly of me!"

"Very well, I can use the same weapons. You know my quarrel, here's my revenge!"

She advanced towards him and laid her hand on his arm. He felt himself freezing as he counted the

rings on her fingers. The emeralds and diamonds were magnificent. Even at such a moment his love of beauty made him stop while he looked at them. The commercial side of his nature estimated in a flash their value. That moment cost him more than he guessed. The pressure on his arm tightened.

"Everard," said Lady Blatherwake tenderly. Women had called him "Everard" many times before; but he had very seldom heard it said with such feeling. He started. He tried to withdraw his arm; it was firmly held. He looked at the old lady. She looked at him. She smiled. He didn't. "Everard! I know why you have been coming here. . . . Under pretext of making love to my niece, you have been trying to marry me. . . . No woman is so old as to be blind to what after all is the only thing that matters. . . . What have you to say?"

"My dear lady!"

"Is that all? . . . Don't be afraid . . . you are afraid people will say you are marrying me for my money . . . let them!"

"It is very unlikely you have over-estimated my wealth . . . it would be difficult. . . . I would give it all up for this moment. . . . I am lonely. . . . I choose to disregard your past . . . what little I can find of it . . . but to a woman who loves . . . that little! I am prepared to make you happy. . . . If you could imagine what I felt, when I stooped to make those investigations . . . how I was terrified to find them true! I sent a hundred pounds to the hotel-keeper in the Tyrol, when I found you had really been there to shoot chamois. . . . Everard! Am I foolish? I wasn't so pleased with the hotel-keeper at Trouville . . . they are not such simple people! . . . Will you believe it when I tell you I have been jealous of that

beautiful child . . . she had so much . . . but I now have . . . everything. . . . How shall we face the world? It will need courage . . . you lacked even the courage to tell me. . . . Women, where they love, are braver than men. . . . What shall we do? . . . Shall we go to the Tyrol . . . just you and I? We could take Blanchaille . . . it would make all the difference. . . . The world is at our feet . . . there is nowhere we can't go . . . nowhere I don't want to go; so long as it is you and I, alone. . . . Everard, have you nothing to say? Did you imagine me inconsolable . . . as the rest of the world did? . . . I was till now . . . only lately I have learned . . . that I could not let any other woman have you . . . and that . . . I felt, must be love. . . . That child playing at love! . . . What does she know of it? Everard, have you not the courage to look at me? . . . Look!"

The devil was in this fun, thought the wretched man. If anyone should be announced! The situation was compromising in the extreme. He found his hand imprisoned fast in Lady Blatherwake's two. There lay a horrible strength in her madness. She gazed at him fondly. He didn't know how well she had timed the expression. It had begun to slowly dawn on her face at the sound of the hall-door bell. It reached its height of ecstatic adoration as Mrs. Benyon was announced.

He fled.

Lady Blatherwake drew Mrs. Benyon down on to the sofa. "That you should have come at such a moment!"

"You asked me, my dear!"

"Are you a little before your time?"

She made one or two dabs at her eyes with her handkerchief and bit her lip.

"Rather you than anyone!" which was true; Mrs. Benyon was the greatest gossip in London.

"Dear, dear," said Mrs. Benyon, at a loss what to say. She felt a squeeze of the hand to be the right thing under the circumstances. She longed to know what the circumstances were exactly. She was to hear.

"Dear Everard," said Lady Blatherwake, "after all these years of devotion! He is only afraid people will think it is for my money! What we rich women have to suffer! He would have married me long ago if I had been poor. Of course, you will say nothing. I can trust you! But don't laugh—anything but that. And Everard! He is so really great, so clever; under his manner of happy boyishness, such a gigantic mind! He is thought so highly of! He could not stand ridicule! His position makes it impossible. And why ridicule?"

Mrs. Benyon said, "Why, indeed?"

She stayed just so long as she felt politeness demanded. Then flew off to confide in her dearest friend—a tomb.

The news flew all over London, while Lady Blatherwake lay back in her chair and laughed. She wished Blatherwake were there to laugh too.

Of all this she said nothing to Violet.

Violet, with all traces of tears gone, looking sublimely innocent, told her aunt that she didn't expect to see much of Sir Everard; he was going to be very busy.

She did not say that she knew he had lost interest in her. But she felt it. The way in which he had handed her his handkerchief in the taxi had left her in no doubt. There had been no tenderness in the transaction—no sympathy in tendering it.

She had disgraced herself utterly. She was glad he hadn't been a young man. To cry with a man old enough to be your father didn't matter.

The following day Violet came into the boudoir with the *Morning Post* in her hand, a look of consternation on her face.

"Have you seen this, Aunt Georgina?"

"Seen what? The *Morning Post*? D'you suppose a woman of fashion could get up without seeing it?"

"Yes; but to-day!"

"To-day? What's to-day more than yesterday?"

"There's a great deal more. I was afraid you might not know. Someone has done something very wrong."

"They do that every day, my child. Come, break it to me gently! Have you seen something very extraordinary? Quick! what is it?"

"Your engagement!" gasped Violet.

"Naturally, I have seen it."

"You have? Are you furious?"

"Why furious? It's true."

Violet blushed, blushed, and blushed. Her aunt wondered if she was ever going to stop! The colour surged up in waves, receded to surge again.

"You don't grudge me my happiness?"

"I can't believe it."

"Why not? What do you suppose Everard came here for so often? Why do you suppose I went out into the world again? Do you know I am only sixty—a miserable, a happy sixty? I've more wit in my little finger than you have in your whole body! And affection too! Why should I stifle the best in me? Why should I hunger for affection, when I can take it in overflowing measure?"

"Aunt Georgina!" said Violet.

"Did you amuse Everard? Don't get into your

foolish little head that a face is everything! It's the heart—the warm heart—of a woman who is old enough to love, to renounce, to forgive, that a man wants."

Violet walked out of the room. Lady Blatherwake laughed; but she was sorry for the child.

Sir Everard stayed in bed that day. It was the only place he felt to be quite safe. How should he ever again face his fellow-men? The women he might, in time. They would be ready to blame Lady Blatherwake.

A telephone stood by his bedside. He decided to ring up the old lady. A few seconds later he was asking Parkin if her ladyship was in. "Who shall I say, Sir?"

A moment later, over the telephone vibrated, "Yes; is that you, Everard? Are you happy? What a wonderful day—wonderful! Was it the awakening to you this morning that it was to me? Are you happy?"

"What do you propose doing?" said Lang.

"I have proposed. Now I suppose we shall marry and each go our own way?"

"There's my position to be thought of!" said Lang.

"Your position? It will be enormously improved when you have sixty thousand a year! In fact, you can afford to give it up!"

Pause.

"Seriously, would you mind contradicting the report?"

"And breaking my heart?"

"Seriously, dear lady!"

"Call me, Gee. Never was I more serious."

Pause.

"Everard?"

"Yes."

"If I contradict the report, where do I come in? How do you propose to make restitution?"

"What can I do?"

"You might recall Fgerton at the earliest opportunity."

"Yes—yes."

"He's done well?"

"Very well—brilliantly."

"Get him mentioned in the House, in a flattering way; some reference to the valuable work he has done. If you work that well—"

"Anything—anything. Besides, he deserves it."

"I will contradict it."

"Of course, I can't do it at a moment's notice."

"You mean I am to trust you? I will. A bargain is a bargain. You trust me and I will trust you. Good-bye!"

Lady Blatherwake lost no time in performing her part of the bargain. She contradicted the report in the following manner:—

"Lady Blatherwake advises us to state that her marriage with Sir Edward Lang will not take place."

As she wrote it she chuckled. Violet would never again imagine herself in love with a man who had been engaged to her funny old aunt.

The news of the broken engagement was even more thrilling than that of the engagement itself. Everard Lang had had a bad fall. The world wondered that a man who had pursued beauty all his life should have tried to marry money. The old lady had been one too many for him.

Mrs. Benyon flew round to sympathize. "Yes,

dear," said Lady Blatherwake, "I could have found it in my heart to love him!"

Mrs. Benyon held her friend's hand until she became shy, and wondered when she could leave go. The situation became strained. She was obliged at last to take refuge in a pretended sneeze, which she knew Lady Blatherwake would see through.

She did, of course; and when Mrs. Benyon had gone she laughed till she cried. If only Blatherwake were there to laugh too!

CHAPTER XXVII.

"MY DARLING MOTHER,

"Wot's this about Aunt Gorgina and a jonnie in a comick paper. One of the chaps says she was, and I gave him something for saying one of my relachions were in a comick paper. His nose bled like anything. The French master seprated us, and he yelled blue murder. Bays minimus sayz they always do, they can't help it. He also says his mother is coming down half term D T, and is going to bring him some grub as parents do. He doesn't know what D T means, but he hopes it's all rite, no more does your loving son Michael know."

That letter was written by Michael Charlton to his mother.

She wrote the following letter to Lady Blatherwake :—

"MY DEAR GEORGINA,

"I doubt that the world ever understands one's motives. We must labour under that disadvantage.

"It is quite impossible we ordinary people should ever understand yours ! But I feel—in the dark as it were—a hand held out to me and I take it, believing it to be yours held out to me !

"I feel I am indebted to you ; that you have done something for my sake. I am only grieved if you have done it at too great a cost to yourself. I should

not like you to suffer for the sake of my foolish daughter and her still more foolish mother.

"Perhaps, some day, you will tell me the whole truth. In the dark, I hold out my hand to you and say 'thank you!'"

Lady Blatherwake replied :—

"MY DEAR HELEN,

"It is safest to be in the dark when one laughs. I thoroughly enjoyed it!

"There are not many women of my age who can boast an *affaire du cœur*. After all, to a woman there's nothing like it. It keeps her young. It has rejuvenated me, if it has aged him.

"Dick will be home, I hope, before long. If you must know that much—it was the price of my renunciation!

"Everard Lang has flown. It's the first time he has owned to gout. I am going to stay on and brave it out. People are so amusing!"

Violet wrote to her mother :—

"MY DARLING MOTHER,

"I don't quite know what to say about Aunt Georgina. She has been so kind to me! I can only suppose she isn't quite right. At all events she is frightfully eccentric. She knows it, and says with her wealth she can afford to be anything she likes. She thinks too much of what her money can do. She must have been out of her mind when she thought Sir Everard was in love with her. I am quite shy of going out with her; I am sure everyone is laughing at her. She never has to spell her name in a shop now, which I think looks very bad. She doesn't mind in the very least, and says it's such a comfort.

It is a well known thing that Sir Everard hates a plain woman, and Aunt Georgina knows she's that ; because she says her position as a young woman was very awkward—I mean being the plain wife of a very good-looking man. Of course, if Sir Everard was trying to marry her for her money, it was horrid of him. I never liked him very much, but I was civil to him for Dick's sake. I hope this won't do Dick any harm. Of course, no one really knows who broke it off. Personally, I should imagine Sir Everard did. But everyone is as much in the dark as I am. Aunt Georgina is very kindhearted. It's a pity she says such dreadful things. People laugh and say it's only Georgina, and she may say what she likes, but I think it is a pity. It gives people a wrong impression. I want her to go away now, but she won't.

“ Your loving daughter,

“ VIOLET.”

Laura Listowen wrote the following letter to Valde Raleigh :—

“ MY DEAR VALDE,

“ What in Heaven's name does this Blatherwake-Lang business mean. Are we all mad ? Is it a dream ? What is the old lady up to ? And he ? Has he had a financial crisis ? Has the old lady been one too much for him ? He will never stand the ridicule. Do write and tell me all about it ! There was nothing in his admiration for the modest Violet, then ? Or does this cloak something else ? I am longing to hear——”

Valde wrote back :—

“ Why shouldn't Everard Lang marry who he likes, and for the matter of that the old lady too ?

Under her queer manner I imagine there lies a heart of gold. I wish I could dispose of all my admirers as easily. Why it was broken off surprises me.

"Of course, there was nothing in the Egerton affair. Didn't you hear how she threw her arms round his neck, in the Park, when she heard about Jan? He couldn't stand that—in public. He wanted money, I suppose, and the old lady thought it worth while giving it to him; but on thinking it over, she couldn't part.

"Hugh looks for some quixotic motive, and says he believes she did it to put a stop to the Egerton scandal! Dear old Hugh, if he can call a little thing by a big name he will! Don't worry any more about it! Bend your great mind to this—when you are in Paris——"

The rest of the letter referred to silk stockings and other things.

A friend in West Kensington wrote as follows to a friend in Chiswick:—

"DEAR FLORA,

"Have you been interested in the Blatherwake-Lang affair? We are thrilled! There are all sorts of stories going about; but I know the facts of the case, because Cissie's brother-in-law was told it by a man in the club, whose first cousin's sister-in-law knows the Charltons. There was a dreadful scene when Lady B.—she's quite seventy—discovered that Sir E. L. was marrying her for her money. There was another woman, of course! He has spent thousands on her! Well, the old lady heard of it. The *saddest* part of the whole thing was—don't repeat this—you know that lovely girl who takes the part of Lulu in the 'Luckless Lover.' Well, she's his

daughter! Don't repeat this! He didn't know it till he took the old lady to that very play. Wasn't it dreadful? Both he and she saw it at once. They say the likeness is extraordinary! The *saddest* part of the whole thing is that he was instrumental in sending the girl's lover on a very dangerous expedition, and he was killed. You won't repeat this, because it does no good, and it always reaches the ears of those who look to people like us as examples.

"Teddie says it's all right; hundreds of men might have daughters on the stage and not know it! I say, surely that doesn't make it right. Of course, Teddie's a tremendous man of the world. He has a signed photograph of the girl. She looks so sad! He says she didn't really care for the young man who was killed, although it was a nasty jar!

"Lady Blatherwake divorced her first husband! They say if she hadn't money and all that, people wouldn't like her half so much—which isn't fair, is it? Teddie says she's frightfully kind; what she does no one knows! I like to think the best of people.

"Yours ever,

"CONSTANCE."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

It was August. Lady Blatherwake stayed on in town.

The world—the half that is slow to see a joke—said the old lady had never been the same since her engagement was broken off. Violet stayed with her,

“The Missendens want me to go to them for a dance,” she said.

“Now?” said her aunt sharply.

“Yes.”

“Dick may be back any day.”

“Yes, but a telegram would bring me up to town, sooner than he could get here, after wiring.”

“You are singularly lucid in your——”

“I mean——”

“I understand. If I stay here and wait for the telegram, I can wire it on to you, and you will come up and meet Dick. Hum! Are you glad he is coming?”

“Of course.”

Lady Blatherwake wondered. Violet didn't look as glad as Jan did when John Bailey was expected home to tea.

“Very well; go by all means. When is it?”

“They want me to go to-morrow.”

Violet went. She was restless and unhappy. She could no longer bear the strain of waiting in that great big house for the return of a husband who was practically a stranger to her.

She was quite sure now she no longer cared for him

—in that way. She had grown away from him in his absence.

He ought never to have left her. His duty to her should have come first. That was not her own idea ; it had been suggested by someone else. But she had come to believe it hers and fostered it. As a matter of fact, it had been suggested to her by a sentimental boy who had dared to picture himself her husband, submitted to a similar test. It is the easiest form of flirtation and no doubt one of the oldest. It is curious how ready some women are to imagine other men better as husbands than their own. Violet had broached the subject to Frances, and she had been quite alarmed at the blaze of indignation in Frances's eyes.

Violet wondered as she went to the Missendens what Frances would think of her going. Why should she stay five weary days in London ? Five days she gave herself—five clear days—and then the telegram must come ; and she must return to meet a strange man, who would ask her if she were glad ? He would expect so much—she couldn't give it ! She was sentimental enough to picture herself the heroine of a most romantic situation. Her husband, directly he came into the room, would see that her love for him was dead. He would demand nothing, until she could give him everything. Then as happened under similar circumstances in books, would begin the delightful romance of a husband making love to his own wife. It was the story of all others that most appealed to her. If it were possible that the wife, disguised as a boy, should go a long journey with the husband, and the husband never discover it until she was wounded, all the better. But she realized that would be difficult under twentieth century

conditions. Even in their case there might be delightful misunderstandings—delightful only in retrospect when they were once cleared up—horrible complications and a happy ending. She planned all this out as she travelled down in the train. But she knew it could never be. Dick had been tempestuous—though tender enough she was bound to admit—in his love. He had gloried in the fact that he had swept her off her legs; his courtship had been quick and passionate, and she had loved him or thought she had.

Lady Missenden was delighted to see her. Lord Missenden too, no doubt; but he had eyes for no one but the tiny Jan. In her was centred all feminine attraction. He had just discovered her a flirt, and was enchanted. Laura Listowen monopolized Violet. She affected a tremendous interest in the husband's return, and tried to get Violet to talk about it. Was she shy? Laura laughed. As a matter of fact she was jealous of Violet. She was jealous of any woman being loved. She pitied Violet for being such a goose. She could see she was miserable and shy. Laura wouldn't have dreaded the return of any husband. It was not the worst in Violet's nature that dreaded that return. In her heart of hearts rang the cry, "If only I loved him!" The abstract side of it all appealed to her. She felt the romance of the situation, but it was another side of it that appalled her. She was sorry she could not be glad. She would have enjoyed the excitement; but she didn't really know him!

Laura grew impatient with her, and tried to interest her in the ball. It was going to be fancy dress. What was Violet going to wear? Violet wouldn't say; she showed very little interest in the ball, or in anything

for the matter of that. Laura said she had a dress she wanted her to wear ; it was quite too lovely.

Violet said she already had a dress. Laura gave her up as hopeless. Luckily she had other things to occupy her mind. If anyone had been sufficiently interested in her they might have seen that she was labouring under a very great excitement.

The day of the ball she was out most of the afternoon. When her energy was remarked upon, she said she wanted to have a colour for the evening. Nothing gave it to her like air and exercise. There were those who suspected Laura's colour to lie not in the winds of Heaven.

As a matter of fact, she spent over an hour in the village post-office. She had suddenly discovered the village post-mistress to be a character, a most amusing person. She also wanted to look up something in the postal guide. That she allowed was her excuse ; she really wanted to make the post-mistress talk. She had no difficulty in doing that, but it was certainly not amusing.

Laura leant on the counter, with one finger in the pages of the postal guide, and listened with extraordinary patience to the very intricate family history of Mrs. Toft and all her relations. The variety of diseases from which they suffered was really remarkable. Laura hailed with relief every interruption ; they were rather numerous. They came chiefly in the form of telephone messages. It was for such a message Laura waited.

"It's for his lordship ?" said Mrs. Toft, returning from an interruption to her narrative with renewed vigour.

"Do telegrams interest you ?" said Laura.

"We're not supposed to be interested," said the

woman cautiously. "We're supposed to be machines ; that's what we are !"

"But you must be interested !"

"I don't say but what we're human—it's no sin to be that. It's hard to keep things to ourselves sometimes. When the news came of Mr. Hardy breaking a blood vessel and not being married in consequence, it came very hard, when everyone was telling us reasons that we knew weren't the truth."

"The messages are telephoned to you from Shenfold ?" asked Laura.

"Yes, Ma'am, telephoned ; have you found what you wanted ? There's the telephone again !"

"Not yet."

"It's all there !" said Mrs. Toft as she went, leaving the door at the back of the shop open. This was Laura's chance.

It could only be by stupendous luck that she heard any news of Dick. But if she could get at the contents of a telegram this way, it would save her resorting to even meaner methods.

She leant against the counter, hardly daring to breathe, and looked out, from the stuffy shop, with its smell of bacon and coffee and dried herrings, into the Post-mistress's garden. There the bees hummed in the sweet sultans ; the butterflies danced round the delphiniums. What a day to come back to ! What must Dick be feeling ? Laura listened intently ; she found the sight of lupins, and larkspurs, and hollyhocks distracting, and she shut her eyes ; she wished Mrs. Toft would speak louder. What was she spelling ?

"Dick," spelt Mrs. Toft. "D-i-c-k ? Yes, Dick."

Laura held her breath, "Arrive to-night," said Mrs. Toft ; "that all ?"

"I've found what I want, Mrs. Toft, thank you!" cried Laura.

She started off as fast as she could walk. Half way up the drive the boy with the telegram overtook her; exactly as she had planned it. "A telegram?" she said. "I'll take it." She held out her hand. The boy hesitated; but there was a cricket match going on, and every moment was precious. He handed it over to Laura.

She put it in her pocket. When she got up to the house she saw, in the distance, a group of people sitting under the shade of the trees. They all looked so cool and comfortable. She looked at the shimmering haze of heat through which she would have to pass to reach them. She decided to go into the house first, and get cool before she joined them.

She went in through the hall. On the top of a cabinet, which stood against the wall, arranged in rows were Lord Missenden's gloves. She smiled. How ridiculous it was the number of boots and gloves men had! She stood still. There was a dead silence, except for the ticking of clocks. The half-hour chimed on one as she stood listening. It was the big clock in the outer hall. Through the door she saw beyond into the big hall. It looked so cool, so spacious, so comfortable. Great vases of flowers stood on the tables.

It all looked so delightful, so English, so luxurious. What would it look to Dick Egerton coming from Africa? What a home-coming! What would it all count if he was disappointed in Violet? It could be a hell, of that she was certain. She knew enough of men to know what it must be to come home to a wife like that. Why should Violet have it all her own way? Why should her husband think her a saint, when she was only too stupid to be anything else?

Laura put her hand on the cabinet and gave it a little shake. It seemed very firm. It was probably never moved. It would certainly not be moved by the Missendens. She then took the telegram out of her pocket and put it behind the row of gloves—the row next the wall. It must be seen there at once. Then, being of a tidy turn of mind, she set to straighten the gloves she had inadvertently disarranged. In so doing she must have touched the telegram. It slipped behind the cabinet. Laura went upstairs. She waited until she was cool and then joined the group under the trees. As she approached it she noticed particularly Violet; noticed the graceful bend of her head, as she leant forward to listen to a man who was talking to her. He was sitting on the grass at her feet. Why should a clever man, as this one was, be so infatuated with a woman as stupid as Violet undoubtedly was? Laura felt lonely and neglected. Why had she been allowed to spend an hour by herself at the village post-office. She had wanted to, of course, but she would have liked to have found difficulty in doing it. If Violet had gone, every man of the party would have sworn to a sudden desire to buy stamps at that particular moment.

The whole thing was obviously unfair. But she said gaily how delightful they all looked.

Someone asked if Mrs. Toft was amusing.

"She's never that," said Lady Missenden. "She's such a grumbler."

"She amused me rather," said Laura. "She told me that her first husband was a Mormon, but couldn't afford to keep no more than her. I can imagine he must have got tired of her! Poor Mr. Toft, I feel sorry for him."

"Perhaps they don't live together," said someone.

"Everyone in that station of life must. There is no room for anything else. That's where the unfairness comes in!" said Laura. "There's no Africa in that station."

There was a silence. If a look could have killed Laura she would have died at the eyes of the man who was talking to Violet.

"When do you really expect your husband?" she said, turning to Violet.

"Not for two or three days," said Violet.

Laura watched the colour come and go in the girl's face, and she tried to imagine herself amused.

The man who had been talking to Violet began to tug furiously at the grass. He would have given much to read those blushes. Was she in love with her husband? Of course she was. If so, why wasn't she in London waiting for him? Why wasn't she at Southampton? From an enormous interest in her he suddenly jumped to a hasty condemnation. She ought to have gone to meet her husband. He hated to find her less of a woman than he had imagined her; though in his heart of hearts he was glad she hadn't gone. A man must come to such a woman. He probably didn't deserve such a wife. Why did women marry boys? She was too young to have been married; far too young to have been!

"You have never looked at that dress I want you to wear to-night," said Laura. Violet said she would go in and look at it!

They went into the house together. "How well that girl walks!" said Lady Missenden, as she watched the two women walking away.

"What is the husband like?" asked two men together.

"The most delightful creature in the world. What

a state of excitement he must be in ! Imagine coming back to England in weather like this ! ”

The weather did not especially appeal to the men's imaginations. Laura showed Violet the dress, and Violet very naturally said there was very little of it. Laura said that was rather—anyway, what there was was so lovely.

Laura was absolutely ignorant as to where Dick was to arrive that night. It might be in London ; in which case Violet would not be there to meet him. That would, to a certain extent, spoil the home-coming. If he came down to the Missendens it would be really dramatic if Violet met him dressed as Salome. It would probably spoil the meeting to a greater extent.

As the hour of the ball drew near, Laura grew more and more excited. She hoped Violet would appear as Salome. She hoped her vanity would overcome her scruples.

The house-party was assembled in the hall, with the exception of Violet. They wondered why she was so long in dressing. Laura sat with her attention fixed on the staircase. A motor drove up to the door. Laura was probably the only one who heard it. She held her breath ; she knew it couldn't be a guest. Down the staircase came Violet.

Everyone turned to watch her. She had never looked more lovely.

Lady Missenden going to meet her said, “ You beautiful creature ; but it would never do if your husband saw you like that ! ”

“ My husband ? ” said Violet.

“ No, no ; I meant if he should come ! ”

The beautiful nun smiled, relieved. It was as a nun Violet was dressed. Nothing could have been

farther removed from Salome. Her face gained a wonderful spiritual beauty by the dress.

A husband coming back would not wish to find a wife more lovely. The shock Lady Missenden had anticipated could have been got over.

Laura wasn't amused. "How dull you are, my dear!" she said.

"And how beautiful!" murmured one man.

The doors were thrown open and Captain Stuart was announced.

His intention had been to come in unannounced. Then he had thought it might frighten Violet. He had never imagined that she wouldn't at once guess what he had come for. His one wish had been not to frighten her; the difficulty that now confronted him was that she didn't seem to associate him with the object of his mission. She seemed surprised to see him; asked him how he had come; what he was going to wear; and why he was so late?

He drew her aside and said very gently, "You got my telegram? You expected him?"

"Who?" said Violet. He had frightened her now. Her eyes were wide with terror.

"Can't you guess?" he said, smiling at her.

"Dick?" said Violet, in a hushed voice. The look on her face astonished him. No real nun could have looked more horrified at the mention of a husband.

"Yes, Dick; he arrived this afternoon. Didn't you get the telegram? As you hadn't come by an earlier train I chanced catching you. Are you ready?" He was exercising self-restraint; he was longing to shake this beautiful, immovable nun. Had she no feeling?

"Come as you are. I have the motor at the door."

"As I am?"

"Just as you are!"

"Imagine coming home and finding your wife a nun," he thought. He asked Violet if she could take that thing off her head in the motor? He asked the question a little anxiously. He felt that if he were Dick it would be Violet's hair he would want to see. It was one of her greatest beauties. But that she did not in any way owe her beauty to it was evident, since it was entirely hidden now, and he had never seen her look so lovely. It was curious how large the hood arrangement made her eyes look. If a cowl didn't make a monk, a dress went a long way towards making a nun.

She was ready. She got into the motor. Captain Stuart followed and sat opposite her. The door was closed and they were off. London their destination, beyond that and above all—Dick. Violet longed to ask why Dick had not come. Was he already playing the part of the hero in her imaginary novel?

They sat in silence. Violet wondered what Captain Stuart would think if he knew her heart was beating with terror at the thought of meeting Dick? She stole a glance at his face. There was a tenderness about his mouth and in his eyes that frightened her. He was no doubt thinking how happy she was. There was a reverence in his manner. He was thinking beautiful thoughts about her happiness, and Dick's. With just that look in his face would he go to meet the woman he loved. She wondered if any woman could be frightened at it. Would Frances? No; Violet could see how Frances would look. She could see her eyes, so true and splendidly honest, under the pencilled eyebrows. The thought of that look disturbed her. Why hadn't it been given to her to love Dick as Frances, she knew, could love Captain Stuart?

It was absurd that her thoughts should be full of Frances when she, Violet, was going to meet her husband. Horrible that there should be something of envy in her heart for the woman this man might love. Feeling the necessity of saying something—she must at all costs stop Captain Stuart thinking beautiful things about her—she asked if she might have the window down?

"Anything you like!" he said. "That's the worst of these Limousines. I wish we had a car that opened; it's such a lovely night."

Violet said he must sit beside her. He must be uncomfortable?

He assured her, with absolute untruth, that he was perfectly comfortable. A physical discomfort he could have borne. He would have been oblivious to it in the presence of such acute mental discomfort. He was almost relieved when Violet began to cry, although he begged her not to. He endured none of the tortures Sir Everard had endured, because he knew it was the only thing for women to do—under certain circumstances.

"Tears can come of joy as well as sorrow," he said gently.

"It's not—exactly—joy," said Violet, feeling she must be at all costs truthful.

"Very nearly," he said.

She shook her head.

"Joy—only you're a little nervous and shy—eh?"

Violet nodded. That look of tenderness in his face came perhaps as much from understanding her difficulties as from rejoicing over her happiness.

"I believe," he went on, "Dick is just as shy—just as nervous. He was wondering if you would be glad to see him?"

"Was he?" said Violet blushing. "I can't explain what I mean; but—no, I can't!"

"I can almost guess. I've never been married, and naturally I can't really imagine myself a woman; but I can just imagine, if I were, liking—how shall I put it?"

Violet laughed, "You see, it is difficult?"

"It is; but you see, you are an old married woman, and I am a great friend of Dick's, and having been called Mary all my life, something feminine perhaps has become part of me. Does this combination give me the right to say what I want to say?"

Violet nodded.

"Well, then, if Dick were coming back engaged to you, you wouldn't mind! If he were coming back to win your love over again—supposing that in his absence you had begun to forget all he was to you—you wouldn't mind? If he were coming back to win your love, not demand it—you would like that? You wouldn't feel shy then?"

Violet shook her head. How could she under those circumstances have felt shy?

"You see, I *do* understand! I said you were an old married woman—in reality you are such a very young one; but being married, I can say things to you? To that we agreed. If Dick came back not a husband—with no right to demand more than you could give—you would feel happy? Dick is a lover; he is a wonderful person. You mustn't blame him if he has come back desperately in love with you—he's that; but what troubles him is that—it is difficult, as you say!"

It was so difficult that Mary Stuart was in despair. He was conscious of having said over and over again the same thing, and being no nearer saying what

he had to say than when he started. He made another effort. He wondered if it wouldn't have been easier to say what he had to say to a woman who showed feeling. She would have anticipated what he wanted her to understand; would have helped him out. A broken-hearted woman would have been easier to deal with than this child who sat beside him, with her hands folded, unmoved except for the few tears that had fallen, leaving no trace on her lovely face.

"It is difficult, as you say. You will have to be very gentle and patient with him, and accept very tenderly his adoration, because, well, can you understand what I am trying to tell you. Guess why he didn't come? Imagine why he sent me?"

"Good heavens!" he thought, the difficulty was stupendous. He would rather, ten thousand times, have faced a physical danger than break bad news to a wife—such a wife too, a baby—about such a husband.

Violet put out her hand. It was a perfectly natural impulse. All her life she had put out her hand when she had wanted comfort. Just as naturally he took it. Violet found comfort in the strength of his grip. She was not too miserable to notice the whiteness of her hand in his brown one. All her life it had been the unessential things she had grasped.

"Dear Mrs. Dick!"—the grip tightened—"Dick has come home—ill. He's as weak as a baby; as dependant on you as a baby. He can demand nothing! You can give him everything! The chance is—yours!"

Violet withdrew her hand; she was crying. "Is it horrid of me to feel glad—not that he's ill?"

"No, not now that we understand; but remember, some women wait for a chance all their lives and it never comes."

"It's awful, he's being ill. I can't imagine him ill——"

"I know—I know."

He knew well enough she wasn't in love with Dick, and dreaded his return. But why she wasn't in love with him he couldn't imagine. Was she no woman? Just a beautiful doll?

Violet asked him how it was he understood everything?

He asked her smiling if she thought he did understand? He didn't say so, but he was beginning to think how little he did understand her. She said he certainly understood where other people's affairs were concerned.

"And not my own?" he said, seeking to distract her, not because he found it interesting to talk about himself.

"Certainly not your own?" she said.

"What should a nun know?"

"This nun knows about you, and——"

"And?" he said.

He felt safe in asking the question, if it amused her. The only love he cared for was buried deep down in his heart, beyond the reach of idle curiosity. He felt no danger of its being discovered. All he wanted to do was to amuse Violet. The only way to do that apparently was to talk personalities. To talk of her affairs, at the moment, seemed fraught with danger. They couldn't well wreck themselves on the shallows of his. He wanted to make the drive seem as short as possible.

"What is she like? tell me that! I shall know if it is the one I mean," said Violet.

"It's quite impossible; we're talking nonsense!"

"No, it's not in the least nonsense. I shall know at once if I know her."

"Most people know her."

"Is she so popular?"

"With everyone? I defy a man to see her without falling in love with her; yet there is something about her that disarms jealousy. There is no woman who could be jealous of her—no nice woman!"

"Is she so good?" asked Violet a little jealously, wondering why all men held so precious in women what so many of them were ready to kill.

"She's very, very good. There's only one time when she is more delicious, and that is when she is very naughty."

"What is she like?"

"In appearance?"

"Yes," said Violet, wondering what else he could have imagined she meant. Didn't he know with what relief some women hear that another isn't really pretty, but has a very sweet face? Violet was hoping for this comfort—in a way.

"Well, to begin with, her eyes! They are as clear and as unclouded as the heavens on a summer's day. They are, perhaps, even more beautiful when they are like the heavens reflected in a still pool."

"Blue?" said Violet.

"Sometimes!"

"But—go on!"

"What shall I say? She's truthful, sober, and honest!"

"No, seriously."

"She's never serious—at least not often—unless you tell her an untruth, something that isn't quite true. Then she looks at you with those solemn eyes of hers and says, 'Is it true?' and she twists your

waistcoat button round and round, and what can a man do but say he's sorry, and promise never to do it again ; to save his—button."

"Please be serious," said Violet. "Are you talking about a woman ?"

"Yes, certainly ; a woman's a woman, be she six or six-and-twenty."

"Is the one you are describing six ?"

"Just about. I am trying—only you won't let me—to describe every little girl of six ; most men love them."

"No, but seriously, I mean a real woman."

"Lives there a woman more real than one of six ? What wile does she not use ? What power has she undeveloped ? She can hurt as much and as kindly as her elder sister. She can be just as disdainful——"

"Please be serious. Don't you want to know who I mean ?"

Captain Stuart would very much rather have gone on talking of little girls ; but he only wanted to amuse Violet.

"Well, as you like ; personally, I think it best to leave such things alone—when they are hopeless."

"Why hopeless ?"

"Just for the very reason that the love one wants is not always to be had for the asking."

His thoughts went, as he spoke, to Dick Egerton. If for the asking he could get the love he was looking for and expecting !

"Have you asked ?" she said.

"No !"

"Is it fair on Frances ?"

The question was startling in its direct simplicity. It came a bolt from the blue. "She loves you, doesn't she ?"

"If—I could believe that!"

"You ought to tell her! Everyone thought it was Mrs. Grieve. Frances does!"

Lady Blatherwake would have groaned if she had heard that.

"Elsie doesn't," he said.

"You told her?"

"She knows."

"So she won't mind?"

Violet saw her stupidity there. Of course, Elsie would mind.

That was what the look in her eyes meant. She minded every minute of her life; and her life was made up of minutes, hours, and days. It is the longest life that is lived minute by minute.

"Why have you never told Frances?" asked Violet.

"I don't know. There are some women one feels are miles above one. There's something about Frances——"

"I suppose you love her, that's all!"

"I suppose that explains everything. Love makes cowards of us all. It isn't till a man loves that he feels his unworthiness. . . . I shall never forget this drive!"

"Nor I!" thought Violet, and she shivered.

He leant forward and put up the window, "I'm not cold," she said. They were in the outskirts of London. Their progress was slow. They seemed to crawl through the lighted streets. They crept through lines of costers' barrows, on which torches flared. They were mostly ugly faces that shone in the glaring light. It shewed up a sad and distressing side of life. Violet retreated as far as she could into the corner of the motor. She thought that, ugly and

coarse as those women and men were, it was possible they knew what love was, and if they did, it lifted them far above her. They were kings and queens, all of them. They, with the silent man in the corner of the motor, shared a glorious kingdom, while she stood without the gates—afraid to knock.

She shook herself; she was getting absurd and sentimental.

She looked out of the window, thinking as she did so that Frances would not have been afraid to look! She saw one man step out from a crowd of others round a barrow and hold out his arms to a child, who ran into them.

The man was ugly, coarse, and rough; but within the shelter of his arms a child could find happiness. Violet shuddered; she wished she hadn't looked. She was only feminine enough to love clean children. She could not hold out her arms wide enough to take in those that were ragged, dirty, and uncared for.

The motor went faster as they got into more fashionable quarters, and finally it drew up at the house in Grosvenor Square.

"I can't get out," she said.

"You can—you'll feel nervous for a moment—then it will pass—when you see how much he wants you—needs you. Remember, it's your chance. Think what it is to him to come back like this!"

"If only I loved him!" thought Violet.

Captain Stuart led her up the wide staircase—past the drawing-room. What did she want to see Lady Blatherwake for, when Dick was waiting?

They stopped at the bedroom door. With a gesture he held her back—not that she shewed any eagerness to go in—and he softly opened the door.

A nurse passed out and stiffened when she saw a nun on the threshold.

"It's Mrs. Egerton," whispered Captain Stuart, which more than ever puzzled the nurse. Both he and Violet had forgotten the dress. Violet stood at the door and gazed into the darkness of the room. She saw nothing—she heard nothing. He looked at her and saw her eyes wide with fear—he was sorry for her. He took her hand. This time the tight grip was hers. He gripped back. "It's your chance," he whispered. "Say something."

"No, you!" she said, as a child might have said it.

"Dick—old chap!" he said. If anything feminine had become part of him, it was the tenderness in his voice.

"Has—she—come?" said another voice. It was so weak that something tightened round Violet's throat. She saw again the garden, and the shadows creeping over the lawn, as on that summer's day when he had gone away and she had loved him.

"She's here," said Captain Stuart. He motioned to Violet to go in. He closed the door behind her, and found himself out on the landing—laughing. Was he laughing?

In the semi-darkness Violet could just distinguish something on the bed, "Put on the—light," it whispered.

"Can you bear it?" she whispered.

"I've lived for this—if I could see you—once——"

When Violet turned on the light she saw that the darkness had been more for her sake than for his.

The light revealed to her a man who could demand nothing. It was her chance! The light revealed to him—a nun!

He just breathed the word. The dismay in his

voice came as a relief to Violet. She was on the point of breaking down. That Dick should think her really a nun saved the situation. She pulled off the hood and undid her hair, which fell in soft masses over her shoulders. She knelt beside him and gently put her arms on either side of his.

"My—wife!" he said. "And I'm such—a wreck."

"I'm so glad," she whispered.

If her words surprised him he did not say so. Perhaps they were part of that world of dreams into which he was gently slipping. . . . In time . . . if he lived to be a boy again . . . he must reach that wonderful world where there is no burning, pitiless sun, but deep, merciful shade; no arid, parched desert-lands, but cool, fruitful valleys and green meadows; where, under the shade of murmuring trees, grass grows knee-deep . . . where trout stir the waters in the softly-gliding streams and dart from under weeds and stones. . . . A boy, if he were young enough and patient enough, might catch the trout as they lay under the bank. . . . Oh! to be a boy again . . . to put his hand deep, deep down into that cool stream . . . deep . . . deep. . . .

He was slipping farther and farther into that world of dreams . . . the cool waters were closing over his head. . . .

Meanwhile, down in the drawing-room, Lady Blatherwake was crying, and Captain Stuart was begging her not to.

"Why mayn't a woman cry when she's happy?" she said. "Think what those young things have before them! What a future!"

"What a future!" said Mary Stuart softly.

"By your face anyone would think it was you who had come home to your wife!"

"I may come home to her some day; who knows?"

Lady Blatherwake looked at him sharply. She wasn't sure but what that wife was to be greatly envied. "Will Violet ever learn to love like that?"

"Like what?"

"As your wife might."

He laughed. "She will learn to accept beautifully, and that, after all, is what Dick wants. It's his nature to give. It's her chance now."

Dick lay asleep upstairs and Violet knelt by his bed. She was afraid to look at him. She had to get accustomed to suffering; she had so seldom met it. It frightened her just as the other great things in life frightened her.

At last she found courage to look—for a second only.

Then by degrees she looked longer; and when she found she could look longer she found she was no longer afraid.

It was her chance; she would take it.

As she knelt, her heart seemed to stir as if about to awaken; then it burst the bonds that held it—and she thanked God for the chance.

She stayed kneeling until the nurse stole in quietly and gently led her away.

"It's only weakness now," she whispered. "Now that he's seen you he'll get all right. The doctors said so. I was puzzled when I saw you at first. I felt sure he wasn't a Roman Catholic."